CBS-TV's Smash Comedy Series

BRIDGET LOVES BERNIE

LANCER BOOKS

by PAUL FAIRMAN

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MEET TV'S NEWEST NEWLYWEDS!

BERNIE ..... DAVID BIRNEY
BRIDGET ..... MEREDITH BAXTER
SAM STEINBERG ... HAROLD J. STONE
SOPHIE STEINBERG . BIBI OSTERWALD
WALT FITZGERALD ... DAVID DOYLE
AMY FITZGERALD .. AUDRA LINDLEY
UNCLE MOE ..... NED GLASS
FATHER MIKE ... ROBERT SAMPSON
OTIS ..... WILLIAM ELLIOTT

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LANCER BOOKS NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK

BRIDGET LOVES BERNIE

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LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

ONE

I'm a *ketzeleh,* Bridget reminded herself as the big hill came in sight. That means *cuddly kitten,* and I guess Bernie thinks so. He's a *shepseleh,* a *lambie pie,* and I can agree with that except when he gets into one of his stubborn moods. Papa Steinberg, he's a—oh-oh!

The mental exclamation was brought on by the willowy blonde swinging into sight again. This turned Bridget's attention back to matters of the moment, intercepting the blonde and catching up with Bernie being the most important of these.

The scene of Bridget's travail was Manhattan's Central Park; the time, mid-morning of a glorious spring day; the occasion, the Sunday Marathon Bike Race that Bernie had conned Bridget into. The winding, hilly roads through Central Park had been barred to all traffic except bicycles and every zany faddist in New York was out after the prize.

Bridget gritted her teeth and fairly leaned on her pedals as the blonde swung gracefully in to lessen the

width of distance between herself and Bernie; gritted and leaned, but to no avail.

"Bernie! Wait up!" Bridget called out plaintively. That brought his head around, but only far enough to put the blonde into his line of vision. There, the movement stopped. A disgusting smile spread over his face, half of which Bridget could see—enough to realize how silly it made him look. Strange how the direction of a smile changed it, she thought. Then his lips fluttered, and though the distance was appreciable, Bridget, a schoolteacher, was adept at lip reading and she bristled anew. What did he *mean* by saying: *Good morning, it's a nice day,* to that witch! Bridget could not see the blonde's reply but it was obviously some carefully worded, seductive answer, psychologically pre-tested to be effective. Couldn't he *see* that she was only leading him on?

"Bernie!" Bridget wailed again and this time she got his whole attention; but only to grin like a monkey sitting on a feather duster and wave a paw at her.

Oh, well, Bridget soliloquized. There's really no danger. We *are* married and Bernie would have to ask for a divorce after we get home. Then there's Sophie, his mother, and Sam, his father, and Moe, his uncle, and *my* father and mother all getting their two cents in, and I don't think that blonde could *make* it against that kind of competition.

There was a good reason for such rambling thoughts. Bridget was tired. They'd hit the park at seven that morning. It was now almost noon and what with the hills and her short legs and a zillion mad

cyclists whizzing this way and that, Bridget had about *had* it. She longed for the solitude of their cozy little apartment over Sophie and Sam's Jewish delicatessen with its combination smells of pickles and spiced meats and cheeses and all the other things that made the odors positively divine when you were hungry.

She was even ready to settle for her old room in her parent's Fifth Avenue town house where there was always a tub or two of eleven-dollar-a-pound black Russian caviar to munch on if you so fancied.

As a matter of fact, Bridget was even ready to settle for a hot dog and that was just what she did. She gave up the chase and pulled over to a cart where the young white-coated attendant told her—by way of an appreciative glance—not to worry about her legs; that they were perfectly okay.

"One with onions and mustard," she said gratefully and had taken three bites and drunk half her Coke before she realized she didn't have a blessed dime in her poke! All she had were the keys to that stupid apartment over the smelly delicatessen where Sophie, his mother, and Sam, his father, and Moe, his uncle, kept popping up so often you couldn't tell who lived there and who didn't. Let the blonde try a few semesters of *that*! She'd be ready for a rubber room in no time!

Oh, yes. No money. What did one do in such a case? Bridget looked on the side of the cart for identification. Maybe it was part of a chain of such establishments. Then Daddy might have a charge account with them;

or Mother, for afternoons in the park with her club friends.

No such luck. The cart said, *Freddy's Drink & Dog—Frederick P. Rensaleer—sole prop.* No chain. Just an independent businessman; one with nice eyes and a cute mouth, incidentally.

"Are you Freddy?"

"At your service, Miss. Another dog?"

"No, I don't think so. How is business?"

"So-so. How's yours?"

That sounded vaguely impertinent but Bridget gave him the benefit of the doubt. After all, she was only stalling for time until she could think of something to use in lieu of money. Otherwise, she would hardly have been standing there rapping with the help.

"I'm a schoolteacher," she said. "This is vacation."

"I'm on vacation too. Columbia. What do you teach?"

"Elementary."

"Too bad. The New York public schools are a mess. Do you wear a crash helmet?"

"Oh, they aren't so bad. At least mine isn't. What are you studying?"

"Survival. Another Coke?"

"I don't think so."

Freddy opened one for himself and snapped his fingers. "Hey—there's a free concert in the Sheep Meadow at eight o'clock. Want to go?"

"No, she doesn't!"

The reply was voiced sharply, and even before she turned, Bridget realized it had come from Bernie. He

was standing there leaning on his bike regarding the dog wagon and its owner with marked distaste.

"What happened to you?" he asked his wife.

"I got tired. Pay the man, please. I haven't a sou."

Bernie came up with the price of a dog and a Coke and Freddy turned away muttering, "That was a short romance," and Bridget and Bernie got on their wheels and rode off.

"I looked and you weren't there."

"How could I be there? I couldn't find room to squeeze in between you and the blonde."

"Oh, come on! We hardly said two words."

"I saw five with my own eyes."

"Her name is Wanda Lee and she lives in the Village. She's a waitress filling in until she can get a part. She wants to be an actress."

"I suppose you offered her a role in your play—the one you haven't written yet."

"She gave me her address to keep in mind, just in case."

"To keep in mind? Well, tear it up. Have amnesia. I'm dead tired and I want to go home. This is a crazy race anyhow. Nobody's going to be able to tell who wins."

"Winning isn't the point. It's for the event. The exercise. Opening the park to the people."

"Was it closed to them?"

"You know what I mean. Fun City. A great place for a vacation."

"Northern Maine's nice too . . . "

They were out of the park and peddling down Fifth

Avenue, and now they came abreast of an august-looking town house across the face of which $100,000 could have been seen by the perceptive who might study it with concentration. Actually, the perceptive would have been wrong. The pad had cost Bridget's father half that much again and would probably rise further in value by the end of the week—any week.

Bridget glanced back over her shoulder at the place and thought: That was where I lived and breathed and had my being and spent my girlhood and it wasn't at all bad, really. The plumbing was good, no dripping faucets, and if the oil burner went poof there was someone on the job even before your toes got cold. If I bought something at Tiffany's or Henri Bendel's, I used to find the delivery truck waiting at the door when I got home. It was real nice.

Then I met Bernie . . .

She didn't go on from there because her brain waves were getting as tired as her legs, and besides, the neighborhood was changing. The gold-plated elegance of upper Fifth Avenue had given way to the still-elegant but more commercial reaches of upper Madison Avenue, and that in turn to the less selective blocks of Lexington lower down, while Bridget was thinking of the leaky bathtub faucet over the delicatessen where Uncle Moe applied a pipe wrench with all his old-world love of good craftsmanship and brought forth a deluge that reached as far as the bedroom rug.

Life! How it *did* go on!

Arriving home, Bernie and Bridget wheeled their

bikes into the deli and toward the storeroom. There were half a dozen customers in the place, with Sophie busy at the sandwich counter and Sam mopping up where somebody had spilled cottage cheese out of a Lexington Avenue Special.

"There by your foot, Dad," Bernie said. "I don't want to get my tires dirty."

Sam came erect with a snort. "Your tires yet! Where do you think you are? In the Fitzgerald living room? You two out schlepping around in the park while your poor old mother and father slave for a living!"

"And don't forget your poor old Uncle Moe."

This last came from behind a sugar sack where Moe Steinberg was squatting on a Pepsi case with a small chess board in front of him.

"That Fischer!" he crooned. "He's got Spassky running like a whipped pup. Old Tzar Nicholas must be spinning in his grave."

This interested Bernie, who turned his bike, pulled it through the last of the cottage cheese, and said, "Tzar Nicholas! You lost me. What's he got to do with it?"

"He's the last Russian I'll allow to pass my lips—that's what he's got to do with it. Any of that bunch that came later—phooey!"

Bernie craned his neck to get a better look at the chess board. "What did Fischer do?"

Uncle Moe beamed. "Well, our boy got there ten minutes late to begin with. Spassky had already made his opening move, and—"

Bridget pushed past Bernie and deposited her bike in the storeroom. As she emerged, Sophie sang out from

the sandwich board. "Over here, honey."

Bridget obeyed the call and Sophie thrust forth a positively divine concoction of lettuce, pickle, tomato, spiced meat, and lox, all held together by four pretty red toothpicks.

"There, honey," Sophie said, "That'll take the wrinkles out of your girdle!"

Sophie was fantastic after her fashion. She could keep half a dozen sandwich orders in her head, put them together one after another from a bewildering number of ingredients, and still look into her daughter-in-law's mind with X-ray eyes and know exactly what her problem was. Empty stomach, weary calves—low spirits therefrom.

"You eat that and then go up and take a hot bath and watch the golf tournament on TV. Grown men trying to knock balls into those little holes with a stick. It will make you laugh and forget your troubles."

"Thanks, Sophie," Bridget said for the sandwich, if not the advice, and went slowly upstairs munching the monstrosity . . .

As she turned on the water, she pondered her situation. It was so different than it might have been:

Right now, I could be up at the country place in Maine—out on the lake behind a motor boat on water skis—or riding the shoulders of any one of a dozen yummy young men while they did the work. Then I could go for leisurely cocktails and finally dinner by candle light with dancing and then whatever my inclinations suggested before bed.

But where am I really? Upstairs over a delicatessen

eating a sandwich that would give my mother indigestion just looking at it, and getting ready for an evening with the TV or a book or maybe a card game with my in-laws if the sandwich bread runs out and they have to close the deli early.

So what would the unbiased observer say?

That I'm crazy.

But unbiased observers can be as blind as bats. All they see is what's poked under their noses. A father with a few million clams, a luxurious nest to live in, as glittering a future as money can buy—those things on one side and Bernie on the other.

That would be their mistake; looking at Bernie and only seeing a middle-class Jewish boy who drives a taxi and wants to write plays. What Jewish boy doesn't, I guess—I mean wants to write plays or books?

They wouldn't really see Bernie at all. Not the way he walks and talks and the light in his eyes when he looks at me or the feel of his hand when we reach out in the night, each of us to see if the other is there, and then go to sleep feeling safer and warmer than before. None of those things, so I guess I won't take a poll of the unbiased observers. I'll just keep on making my own decisions like loving Bernie and, good lord! If I have to, his Mama Sophie, and his Papa Sam, and his Uncle Moe, except they're nice and they love me and I do too love them and so what have I got to lose?

Bridget stopped to take a mental breath as she munched contentedly on her sandwich—what was left of it after her bath had taken all the weariness out of her abused muscles and made her look human

again—cool and crisp in her pastel-striped shift, the one that Bernie liked.

She walked dreamily past the telephone and saw a note propped on it. A quick passing glance told her vaguely that it read:

Bridget honey:
Oliver phoned. He said call him back.
Love and stuff.
Uncle Moe.

What that meant to her at the moment was that Uncle Moe had been up there during the Central Park thing, maybe watching Fischer on the TV, and she went automatically to the place where he would put his feet, on the five-hundred-dollar needlepoint chair Mother had picked up at a bargain for her at Smyth's. She brushed the seat as she passed. Uncle Moe loved to put his feet up on things.

From there she strolled to the window and looked pensively down onto Lexington Avenue where she saw a little old tennis-shoed lady miss death by inches as she crossed in the middle of the block.

How life *did* go on!

She stood there musing until she heard familiar footsteps on the stairs and turned from the window, not consciously realizing that she'd been waiting for those footsteps all the time.

Bernie bounded into the room.

"That Fischer! Uncle Moe's right. He's the greatest."

"I thought Uncle Moe's idol was Moshe Dayan?"

"He's the permanent idol. Fischer's the temporary

one. As long as he keeps winning chess games from the Russian, he'll remain Uncle Moe's temporary permanent idol."

Bernie was chomping on a sandwich of his own. He passed the telephone stand, slanted his eyes down over a huge dill pickle that was sticking out from between his rye and said, "Hon, you're supposed to call Oliver it says here."

Then he went to the TV and found the golf tournament and flopped into a chair.

"That Nicklaus! He's the greatest!"

"Don't put your feet on the needlepoint."

His feet dropped to the floor while Bridget went to the sink to wash mustard off her fingers. When she got back, things began shaping in her mind. She went to the phone and stared at Uncle Moe's note, then she crossed the room to face her husband, standing in front of the screen so he couldn't see Jack Nicklaus miss a three-foot putt.

"Bernie Steinberg! You are really something else!"

Bernie gaped appropriately. Then he quoted from a very old comic strip—a tag-line that was coming back into fashion.

"Okay—whistle the patter."

Bridget started at what she considered the beginning: "When we were in the park, my dear spouse, a blonde witch made a pass at you and how did I react? I was livid, that's how I reacted. I wanted to dewig the arrogant strumpet and show her bald head to the world."

Bernie considered that and had no comment as he

waited for more. Even as he craned his neck to watch Lee Trevino get out of a sand trap, he knew there had to be more.

"So what did I do, actually? I showed normal female jealousy plus the added defensive reaction generated by the fact that you were my husband, not merely a boyfriend."

"I still am—a boyfriend—I mean a husband—Watch it!"

Bernie watched it while Trevino sank a twenty-foot putt and almost curled Jack Nicklaus' lovely blond hair.

Bridget did not watch. She went on with her plaint.

"So we get home. There is a note on the phone telling me to call Oliver, obviously male. So what do you do? You blandly say in effect, 'Darling, call Oliver,' and go right on eating that psychedelic mess your mother made for you. That's what you do!"

Feeling called on for a response at this point, Bernie asked in all innocence, "What was I supposed to do?"

"Show a little normal jealousy for Pete's sake! Or concern. Or at least a faint touch of interest."

Bernie watched Jack and Lee walk off the green together as though they were bosom buddies, and said, "Okay, who *is* Pete?"

"Pete?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't know any Pete!"

"But you just said—oh, I'm sorry. Who is Oliver?"

Bridget thought for a moment. "I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"I don't know a soul on earth named Oliver."

"Then what's the fuss about?"

"The fuss? Don't try to wriggle out of my trap. It doesn't make any difference whether I know an Oliver or not."

Bernie reached up and pulled Bridget down beside him, at the same time punching the remote control button, changing the TV picture to show a bowling ball slamming into ten waiting pins.

"A split," he commented. "Let's see him get that one. Now about this Oliver thing, sweets. You lost me."

"The point is, you didn't *know* that I don't know an Oliver. Not when you read that message. For all you knew he might have been an old suitor still pursuing me and making my life miserable."

"I'd clobber him," Bernie said virtuously. "But you *don't* know him. So what's the grief?"

Bridget gave up. She twiddled with Bernie's hair for a few moments. Then she said, "Darling, we have a problem."

"A problem?"

"Uh-huh. We don't communicate very well."

"We'll learn. What would you like to do?"

"Well, *A Clockwork Orange* is down the street. We haven't seen it."

But of course that was ridiculous. They'd quite often explained to each other why it was ridiculous, and now they did it again.

"People are crazy," Bernie said.

"Idiots!"

"Especially here on the east side."

"Definitely."

"What is a movie, anyhow?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Two hours of cockamamie stuff some producer puts together and nine times out of ten it's lousy."

"Yet people will stand in line clear around the block, for hours—literally for hours—just for the privilege of paying two dollars—"

"Three."

"And some places—if the movie is really lousy—four."

"I know. Just for the privilege of being pushed around by snooty ushers and seeing a hundred and twenty minutes of drivel."

"Rain or shine, you find them out there."

"Flood or hurricane. It makes no difference."

"Around the corner and up the street, four abreast."

"Clear out of the neighborhood sometimes. What's the schedule?"

"There's a midnight show."

"A pretty good picture, I hear."

"Mom could make us a couple more sandwiches."

"And I guess it doesn't make any difference if we eat them here or out in the street."

"That's a thought. Let's go . . . "

So they went to the movies and finally came back home along comparatively empty Lexington Avenue hand-in-hand.

"I like this quiet, early morning time," Bridget mused.

"Good mugging conditions," Bernie said.

"Are you early on the cab tomorrow—or today?"

"Otis has got the early shift."

"Then we can sleep."

"Unless you'd like a quick turn around the park—say seven o'clock."

"You'd have to drag me out kicking and scratching."

They got home to find everything closed and quiet. The night lights gleamed off the shiny salamis in the window of the deli and signs waited patiently to remind passing drunks that Sam and Sophie catered to festive affairs, none too small, none too large, kosher or otherwise.

As he drifted off to sleep, Bernie murmured, "I wonder who Oliver really is?"

"A kook."

"Why?"

"He said to call back and didn't leave a number . . ."

TWO

Bridget flung out an arm and came suddenly awake. A bare, hairy chest! A man! In my bed! What would Mother say?

Then she remembered. Bernie. Her husband. She smiled lazily and pulled on the hairs until the man growled and stirred.

"You're a sadist."

"I like to pull hairs. It's yummy."

Bernie yawned. "What time is it?"

"Morning."

"Still?"

"It's either twenty-five after eleven or five minutes to five. When I wake up my eyes blur. Both hands look alike."

Bernie bounced up. "I'll gamble on five to eleven. I take the cab at noon."

He was in the bathroom and out again, kissing Bridget and saying, "Bye. Gotta run," and then he was gone.

Bridget lay where she was musing on the good for-

tune of being a wife with a husband whose parents owned a delicatessen downstairs. Then said husband could grab orange juice and coffee on the way through, saving a wife the trouble of getting up to breakfast him.

Bad for morale though, she thought. I shall start cooking as soon as I can see Pierre at the *French Rendouvous* and get his recipes for *Pavlova aux fraises* and *Boeuf Bourguignon*. Then I'll surprise Bernie some night. I'll even surprise myself.

She bounced out and showered and dressed and then the phone rang.

Bridget answered and when a male voice hemmed and hawed a little and seemed uncertain, she said, "Is this Oliver?"

"Well, no. You see, I'm taking a poll—kind of."

"Oh? A poll on what?"

"Well, you see, Miss Smith—you are Miss Smith?"

"No. I'm Mrs. Steinberg."

"But—" he reeled off the number. "I got it out of the phone book."

"That's why I'm not Miss Smith, I guess. Our phone hasn't been in long enough to get into the book—under the right name that is. So I suppose Miss Smith must have moved, wouldn't you think?"

"I suppose so—"

"Then the thing to do is wait for the new book and see if her name is in it."

"Well, you'll do just as well, Mrs. Steinberg—really."

"Oh, I see. As long as this is a poll I guess my opinion would be just as good as hers. Right?"

"I'm sure it would."

"What's it about? A TV show or maybe a soap powder?"

"Neither of those, Mrs. Steinberg."

"Please call me Bridget even if it is on short acquaintance. I'm not used to that name Steinberg."

"Oh—?"

"Now stop putting that kind of tone in your voice. I'm *not* anti-Jewish. I married a Jewish boy, didn't I? And I really don't mean I *hate* Steinberg. It's just that my name was Fitzgerald all my life up to a little while ago and I got used to it. So now when somebody—"

"Bridget—" The tone now appealed, asking for the floor.

"—when somebody calls me Mrs. Steinberg, I get the weird feeling they're talking over my shoulder to somebody else."

"I understand completely—"

"The point is, it will take a little while. After that—after I get used to Steinberg—"

"Mrs.—Bridget—please—"

"—I'll feel the same way about Fitzgerald—don't you think?"

"It's quite possible."

"Now what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"I just wanted to ask if you believe in standing up for—well, what you believe in."

"Doesn't everybody?"

"No. You'd be surprised how many people just let things slide no matter how they feel about them. You know—don't get involved—that sort of thing."

"Oh, I believe in getting involved. That is, if I'm for something."

"I'm glad."

"And then if one is against it, I guess the thing to do is get involved on that side—don't you think?"

"I'm sure. Now my second question is—

"Yes—"

"Are you for freedom?"

"Well—"

With doubts obviously predominating, the caller gasped. "Why that's as bad as saying you're not for—not for—well, motherhood—"

"Right," Bridget replied cheerfully. "Not for a while, that is. You see I'm a schoolteacher and Bernie drives a cab and while my father has scads, we still don't want to accept favors and—"

"Bridget—!" It was a kind of wail.

"Oh, yes—freedom. Well, I wasn't sure because I thought you maybe meant like the right to yell fire in a crowded theater."

"You say your father has scads?"

"He's reasonably well fixed, but as I said, Bernie and I—"

"Bridget! I'll be frank with you. We're soliciting for marchers in a spontaneous protest over at the U.N."

"Oh? What are you protesting?"

"The suppression of civil rights in Benglar."

"Where's Benglar?"

"In Africa. You see, Prince Mudgahat is a tyrant and he took over that poor little country in a palace coup. Now he wants to get into the U.N. and they're

voting on it and we don't want them to let him in until he promises to run a decent government."

"Well, have you talked to Prince Mudcat—?"

"Mud-ga-hat."

"He's a stinker, you say?"

"A real stinker."

"Does he know you're trying to put him down?"

"That's why we want the spontaneous demonstration. To let him know we're watching him. Let him know who we are."

"I see, and who *are* you?"

"I'm Clarence."

"Yes, but the rest of your group. There are others, aren't there?"

"Oh, yes. Scads of us."

Bridget, always alert to developments in the passing scene, was interested.

"Tell me, is this the way spontaneous demonstrations are arranged—by calling strangers on the phone?"

"It was Laura's idea. She said if we'd just let our fingers walk through the yellow—I mean the white—pages and depend on the law of averages, well, things might happen. If you'd care to speak to your father—"

Bridget passed that. "How has it been? How has the law of averages treated you?"

"Like way out," Clarence said evasively. "So we'd love to have you come to our protest . . ."

"I don't know. I really don't."

"There'll be Pepsi and hot dogs."

"Well—"

"And maybe, if you have time, you might print a protest sign to carry. We want to be as conspicuous as possible." Clarence paused and Bridget thought he gulped a little over the phone. "And if maybe you'd talk to your father—"

"What about? He's too busy to march in protests. Besides, he might have investments in—where was it again?"

"Benglar. I mean if you'd kind of ask him for a little bread to pay for the hot dogs and pop?"

One of Bridget's weaknesses—if it could have been called a weakness—was sympathy for those who hadn't made it. This could have been part guilt complex because Walter Fitzgerald had made it so impressively while so many other people hadn't even begun to make it. So Bridget always had a hard time turning away from those of the have-nots who bore their misery cheerfully and kept trying.

"Well," she said reluctantly. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. The protest is three o'clock outside the U.N. Building . . . "

Clarence hung up quickly, cutting off any other questions Bridget might have had.

Bridget was late. She got there at three-ten and looked around for the protest. It was difficult to find. Then she saw it, four young people huddled on the walk in front of the plaza, identified by the sign one of them carried. The boy was spinning it on its stick while waiting for the action to start, but Bridget made out the name Benglar.

When Bridget approached the group with her sign, that made two.

"Are you the protest?" Bridget asked.

One of the group, a young man with a long face that reminded Bridget of a horse she'd owned when she was nine, turned from where he'd been watching two miniskirted secretaries eating their lunches on a ledge inside the fence, and said, "I'll bet you're Bridget."

"You're Clarence?"

"Uh-huh. This is Laura and Ralph and Mike."

Ralph and Mike were background people. That was one of the ways Bridget classified her fellow beings, possibly from her schoolroom experiences. Background and foreground people. The background people, it seemed, were—well, always in the background, waiting for the foreground people to tell them what to do. Mike, on his own initiative, was spinning the sign, and Ralph, happy with his muscles, was trying to bend one of the fence spikes.

Laura and Clarence were different. They appeared to have the stuff of leaders, or at least aides to leaders, if they'd only had someone to lead.

Laura said, "Peace," as she stepped forward and turned Bridget's sign and studied what had been written:

HELP SEE THAT BENGLAR GETS WHAT'S COMING TO IT.

"Nice printing," she said. "But it doesn't quite show which side we're on, does it, honey?"

"I wasn't completely briefed on all the facts," Bridget explained. "And I could hardly zero in on Prince Mudcat when I didn't know how to spell his name."

"Bridget's father is loaded," Clarence said, obviously speaking way out of context. But Laura passed that up and looked down the street with some perplexity.

She wore a shapeless, gray Mother Hubbard, with a pair of motorcycle boots revealed when she pulled the skirt up to scratch her knee. Her hair was in a tight bun on the top of her head. She wore a pair of dangling earrings—two Atlases holding a couple of tiny worlds on their bent shoulders while they balanced inside gold rings that held *them* up. Laura wore a black, inch-wide choker around her neck. It was studded with rhinestones that spelled out *Olympics, 1968.*

Otherwise, she was pretty.

Bridget was beginning to feel like a stranger in a strange land. She'd never done this sort of thing before and had attended for that reason. But the way things had turned out, she could be excused a shortness of temper.

"Well, what are we doing? Waiting for Lefty?"

"For Ali," Clarence explained.

"Who's Ali?"

Clarence was not required to answer because at that moment, a cab drove out and a blazing figure, one bordering on the gaudy, burst forth.

Here, Bridget realized instantly, was the stuff of true leaders.

"Ali!" the four protesters breathed in reverent unison.

Ali was as black as all the nights in the world and as attractive as many of them. His tall figure was wrapped in a billowing gown in psychedelic hues. He wore a lime green turban. His eyes flashed brilliant ebony in contrast to teeth of glittering white.

Brisk was the word for him. He paid the cabby who shared the groups' awe and then the cab tarried for a few moments while the cabby regarded the group with bemusement.

Ali strode toward his followers, flashing a smile and rubbing his hands together.

"My little nucleus," he enthused. "From this core, great hordes will grow." He regarded Bridget. "And who are you, sweet love?"

"I'm—"

"She's Bridget," Clarence explained. He left off the Steinberg, perhaps because Ali obviously had Arabian strains in his blood. Or perhaps because everyone went by their first names. "Her father's loaded," he explained.

"Bridget's sign," Laura said. "We don't think it's quite right."

Ali read the legend, but he was generous. "A little vague but that doesn't matter. When the cause is just, Allah doesn't quibble. Now let's start marching."

"Shouldn't we wait for the others?"

"There *are* some others?"

"We kind of hoped so."

Ali's eyes glittered as they bored into the steel and glass of the U.N. Building. "Never mind. He whose cause is just has the strength of ten. We'll clobber the clown. Let's march."

There would have been a solid half-dozen in the group that began circling if Ali had joined in. But he didn't. He stood by the fence and beamed on his follows. "Yak it up," he ordered. "Now all together: Down with Mudgahat! Down with Mudgahat—"

"Down with Mudcat. Down with Mudcat," Bridget chanted. But her mind was elsewhere: on the great lovely slab of a building, the symbol of man's new emergence into the Age of Understanding—the New Embrace of Brotherhood—the House of International Hand-Holding.

It was beautiful!

Only one thing bothered Bridget. With these things the avowed intent of all those involved, why didn't they get on with it? Why weren't the delegates busy laying out the glorious plans instead of parking their cars by fire plugs and in the middle of intersections because they had diplomatic immunity? Why didn't they get together and shout, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" instead of vetoing everything? They had this beautiful big building and all that prestige, so why didn't they tell people to stop fighting?

Of course, Bridget realized her questions were overly simplistic. Still, she couldn't help asking them because when her school classes asked them—the kids serious enough to wonder about such things—they

seemed so basic and sensible.

A sheaf of throwaways were thrust into her hand. It was Ali, his teeth blazing.

"Pass these out to the crowds as they surge by, sweet love," he said.

Bridget came down from the soaring crest of the U.N. Building and looked for the surging crowds. They'd either gone on by or hadn't arrived yet, so she continued to circle and read one of the flyers:

SHARE YOUR PART OF THE WORLD.

Bridget liked that. It conformed so well with the whole concept of global friendship.

There was more in the small print, and Bridget caught snatches of it as she walked:

. . . *With vast stretches of Texas so wide one meets not another soul for hours on end and the hordes of China are stepping on each other's toes . . .*

. . . *While the people of India are crowded so close together they can't get in out of the rain, millions of square miles of British Columbia lie virgin to human feet . . .*

Bridget gasped: "Why, when they say share the world, they actually mean *share the world!*"

She waved the flyer at Ali. "I thought we were protesting for the poor people of Benglar?"

He smiled confidentially. "We are, sweet love, but this is a test. I'm sending up a trial balloon on this new idea. It could be a real money-maker. Like real estate prices could hit bottom and keep right on going down."

Bridget might have given him an argument. After all, how liberal can you get? But then Ali turned away to wave a flyer at a passing citizen and Bridget turned at the end of the elongated ring they were walking to see a young man get off a bicycle there beside her.

The bicycle had a hot dog box on the front of it and the name on the box was, *Freddy's Drink & Dog—Frederick P. Rensaleer—sole prop.*

"Hello, Freddy."

"Why—hello. I never did get your name."

"Bridget. Bridget Fitzgerald—I mean, Steinberg."

"Well, make up your mind."

"Yes—Steinberg. What are you doing here?"

He scratched his head. "I'm not sure. Some cat called me last night and contracted for a catering job."

"Was his name Clarence?"

"Right. How did you know?"

"I suspected."

"Then where's the party? He just said in front of the U.N."

"This is it. A protest."

"When's it start?"

"I think this is it."

"You've got to be kidding!"

Bridget didn't have time to answer because things livened up very suddenly. A big, blue-uniformed fuzz had winged in with a puzzled look on his face to ask Ali, "Have you got a permit for this?"

Then, before Ali could answer, Clarence, who'd been marching in the circle behind Laura, stepped on the dragging hem of her Mother Hubbard. There was a

ripping sound and Laura staggered forward off balance and the sleazy gray skirt parted company with itself across an area which would soon draw a crowd far larger than sympathy for the oppressed of Benglar would ever draw.

Laura fell against Bridget, knocking her into a teetering motion, swinging her around. Her sign swung with her and the end of the two-by-four to which she'd nailed her protest sign, clipped the cop behind his right ear.

The poor man fell forward, grasping at Ali for support. Ali immediately began howling, "Police brutality! Police brutality!"

Bridget, distressed at what she'd done, swung completely around the other way; and with a polished finesse that would have delighted any Laurel and Hardy fan, smacked Ali on the back of his turban, sending him down on top of the dazed, struggling policeman.

Then, either by accident or as a puckish destiny had arranged it, a passing news cameraman, just emerging from the U.N., hove to and began doing his thing as fast as he could snap his shutter.

Bridget, distressed even further and now completely confused, felt a firm hand on her wrist.

"Climb on," Freddy hissed in her ear. "Let's get out of here."

Bridget obeyed, sure of only one thing now: The affairs of Benglar would have to wait . . .

THREE

"Get your feet off the needlework."

Otis, co-laborer on the streets of Manhattan along with Bernie Steinberg—a couple of cab jockeys—dropped his feet to the floor and grumbled, "You're picking on me just because I'm black."

"Sure, and Bridget yells about Uncle Moe's number tens just because he's Jewish. Where'd you get the George Wallace Special?"

"Your ma made it for me when I—"

Otis did a double take at the monstrosity in his fists and said, "George *Wallace*!"

"Sure. We got a few conservatives in the neighborhood. Not enough though to put it on the sandwich list. It's whispered around. Where's Bridget?"

Otis went back to munching morosely while he flipped the pages of *Playboy*. "She's over at the U.N. carrying a sign that says something about Benglar. A protest, I guess." He held up a shred of pallid sandwich filling. "What is this, goat meat?"

"It's Ma's spiced chicken, you dope. Don't let her

hear you call it—" It was Bernie's turn for a double take. "What did you say?"

"U.N. Protest. Benglar. She's carrying a poster."

"You're off your crock. Bridget wouldn't know Benglar from the third oasis west of the sand dune."

"That's a fine way to talk about your well-educated, school marm wife."

"Well, maybe she would, but I mean—you *are* kidding, aren't you?"

"No way."

"Did she tell you she was going?"

"It happened this way. I was in line in front of the Waldorf and this cat came out in a psychedelic nightgown and negotiated for my services. He wanted to go to the U.N. He was an African dude. So I rolled him over there, and there was a miniprotest going on."

"A miniprotest?"

"Too small for anything else. Two chicks and three dudes. And one of the broads—you'll excuse the expression—was Bridget."

Bernie dropped scowling into a chair, the scowl not denoting anger so much as bewilderment.

"I don't get it."

Otis had climbed to his feet and wandered to the window where he stood looking down onto Lexington Avenue.

"She's not at the U.N. anymore, though."

"How do you know?"

"Because she's downstairs in front of the deli. She's sitting on a bicycle eating a hot dog."

"Would you repeat that last item please?"

Bernie asked the question from the bathroom, whence he'd gone to wash his hands; whereupon, Otis enlightened him further.

"Yeah—sitting on a bicycle with a good-looking cat and they're both eating dogs. There's a priest standing there talking to them. Maybe they're getting married."

Bernie kited to the window and then threw his towel on the needlepoint as he headed for the stairs. Otis opened the window, rested his elbows on it, and prepared to be comfortable while he watched.

Bernie skidded into the street. The priest, of course, did not have to explain himself—he was Father Mike, Bridget's brother—only his presence, which he did with a vague gesture.

"I was coming into the deli for a sandwich and I saw this—" His gesture included the good-looking young man and the *Drink & Dog* with Bridget sitting on top of it. "I was naturally curious, so I stopped—"

Bridget was quick with her defense. "Well, Freddy was good enough to bring me home and there wasn't room on the bike so I had to ride up here." Bernie's eyes were on her hot dog while he strove to find words and failed.

"Well, it was a long ride," Bridget said. "Freddy pedaled uphill a lot. And we got hungry."

"Freddy pedaled uphill," Bernie mumbled, "and *you* got hungry."

Father Mike had been studying Freddy. He said, "Didn't I see you at St. Mark's last Easter?"

"That's right, Father. I was in the choir there. But I got too busy."

"One should never get too busy for God," Father Mike said, but it was an unconscious reprimand, his mind obviously not on it. There was too much else of interest going on here.

"Didn't we see you in Central Park?" Bernie demanded.

"At the bike marathon," Freddy said. His hands had been busy inside the back door of his shop. He came out with his product.

"Have a dog?"

It was tendered toward Father Mike but Bernie was closer. He took the offering automatically and jammed one end in his mouth.

"I bumped into Bridget over by the U.N. and offered to ride her home." Freddy constructed another dog and handed it to Father Mike.

Bernie chewed on an oversized bite and said, "You just *happened* to bump into her—way over by the U.N."

"Well, no. I was called over to cater the protest they were having."

Directing his cross-examination at Bridget, Bernie snapped, "Then Otis *did* see you over there carrying some silly poster."

"Was Otis protesting? I didn't see him."

"What happened? Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Bernie! It's hard to explain. I got this telephone call from Clarence—about the protest. So I went over. Then Clarence stepped on Laura's skirt and tore it half

off and—well, I just turned around and that policeman got hit some way and Ali yelled about brutality and—"

"Are you saying you got into a fight?"

"Of course she didn't," Freddy objected, lying with the gentlemanly integrity that marked Columbia students as a breed apart from those at Yale, Harvard, and Dartmouth. "She merely—"

He never finished. At that moment, Sam Steinberg came storming out of his delicatessen.

"In Moses sacred name, what is this?" he demanded. "A boycott? I run a fine establishment. I pay my taxes. I pay high rent. I sell the finest food in town. And here I find my own family, my own loved ones, eating off a bicycle at my curb. Are you three ingrates trying to tell me something?"

Father Mike bravely tried to dodge all responsibility. "I was just walking along and I thought I'd come in for a Cardinal Cooke Special. Then I saw Bridget sitting there and—"

"Get off that box," Sam told his daughter-in-law. "You look like the loser in a Miss Hot Dog contest."

Feeling he'd been insulted, Freddie said, "Now wait a minute. I've got a license. I'm just as much of a legitimate businessman as you are."

"He used to sing in an Easter choir," Father Mike said.

"And if it wasn't for Freddie, I might have been arrested," Bridget wailed.

"Let's get off the street," Father Mike advised. "We're drawing a crowd."

From the window upstairs, Otis called down, "Bernie, put another dime in the meter where the cab's parked."

Bernie grabbed Bridget's hand and hauled her through traffic toward the door. Sam glowered at Freddie and said, "Drop around again sometime—when you run out of mustard," and followed them.

Father Mike licked his fingers and smiled. "They're just a little upset, that's all. They're fine people and they make marvelous sandwiches."

Freddie didn't seem to hear. "She's a real nice girl."

"Thank you."

"Thank *you*?"

"She's my sister. I'm Michael Fitzgerald."

That appeared to startle Freddy—as though he'd thought of God's servants as arriving preconstructed and ready for business.

Father Mike extended his hand. "Well, perhaps we'll meet again."

"Could be."

"In the choir loft at St. Marks?"

"I guess—maybe."

Father Mike went on inside and Freddy stared up at Otis who sat with his chin on the window sill, contemplating the passing scene. Otis was a good person; not uptight in any way, he stayed loose and tolerant and as a rule forgave everyone their sins. So it was only from casual interest that he was counting blacks against whites as they passed in the street . . .

Privacy could be difficult at times—anywhere in the Steinberg establishment, including the apartment

upstairs. So Bernie dragged his wife back through the deli and into the storeroom where they kept onions and potatoes and lemons and two bicycles and there was still room to sit down on the grapefruit crates.

"All right, cupcake," he said a shade wearily. "I'm confused. Let's have it from the beginning."

Bridget strove to oblige. She sat down on Bernie's lap and smoothed his tousled hair and began again with Clarence's phone call. From time to time, Bernie asked piercing questions in order to clarify the picture. Like:

"You say this cat Ali wants to give the State of Texas back to the Indians?"

"No, darling. That's British Columbia. But not to *our* Indians. To the other ones. He wants to give Texas to the Chinese."

"That's what you were protesting for? Bust the Immigration Laws?"

"No. The protest was for the poor Benglars."

"They're in difficulty?"

"You'd better believe it."

Bridget stopped explaining and threw her arms around Bernie in a sudden burst of love.

"Oh, sweetheart! You made me so proud of you!"

Extricating his nose for breathing purposes, Bernie asked. "How come? I wasn't even there."

"But you were out front, on the sidewalk."

"So what? All I did was eat a hot dog."

"No! You were jealous. You were beautifully jealous. You've no idea how happy a girl can get when her husband shows that kind of interest."

Bernie shook his head doubtfully. "Women are

weird. Really weird." He got up, putting Bridget on her feet.

"Well, I gotta get going. The cab's on a meter and it's showing red. Fix up your hair and then go out and apologize to my father."

"What for?"

"For eating somebody else's hot dogs. See you tonight."

He opened the storeroom door, then turned back. "By the way, Oliver called. He wants you to call him."

"Oliver? Who took the call?"

"I did."

"Well, what did you do? What did you say?"

Bernie shrugged. "I said I'd tell you. What else?"

Bernie left and Bridget sat plump down on the grapefruit and stared after him.

"Men are weird," she murmured. "Really weird."

But thank heaven the U.N. episode was over, with no lasting ill effects. Now she and Bernie could go on with their lives as though she'd never heard of Ali or Benglar.

Or so she thought . . .

Walt Fitzgerald, who had gained a son or lost a daughter when Bridget married Bernie—he hadn't as yet quite figured out which—came down to breakfast the following morning with reasonable expectations for the day. He saw no crises in the offing. Stocks would go up or stocks would go down. So, come three o'clock, stock exchange closing time, he would be a little richer or a little poorer. So he came to the table and

jammed a silver spoon into his iced orange-half and looked to his three newspapers.

They were stacked, in order of their importance, by his plate; the *Wall Street Journal* on top with the *Daily News* on the bottom, and the *New York Times* sandwiched in between.

Walt worshipped the *Journal*, respected the *Times*, and tolerated the *News*. He disliked the *News*' tabloid-type vulgarity as he termed it, but the sheet did have the right attitudes. It always backed the President if he happened to be a Republican and always favored the *status quo* if the SQ happened to be conservative.

So he read the *Journal* thoroughly, glanced through the *Times*, marking pertinent articles for future reading he would never get around to, and prepared to glance through the *News*.

But not today, because he'd gotten only halfway through his orange-half when the phone rang. The instrument was at his elbow. He picked it up. Percy Hart was on the other end.

"Walt," Percy said. "I'm so damnedably sorry. Believe me—I am. And you can count on me to help in any way."

Walt mumbled, "Well, thanks, Percy. That's white of you."

Then they broke the connection simultaneously.

Instantly, the phone rang again. This time, it was Mark Reynolds.

"Good lord, old chap! What foul luck. So sorry! Call on me for anything you need!"

"Thanks," Walt mumbled.

Next came Willard Farrington III to promise, "Old man, I'll be there with anything in my power to give—character references—words of counsel—you name it. Good luck."

There were seven of these calls. They'd abated by the time Amy Fitzgerald swept in wearing a gracefully tailored white morning gown she'd picked up at Grace Barth's. It had been marked five hundred dollars but being a smart shopper, Amy had waited two days and gotten it for a third off. Just because you had money, Amy always said, was no reason to throw it around.

"Good morning, dear," she greeted. "Did you sleep well?"

Walt, staring vaguely at his *Journal*, grunted and nodded in that order.

"Is the market opening early this morning?"

"No. Why?"

"I heard the phone ringing."

"That was the boys—some of them."

"Oh?"

"They all called to wish me luck."

"That was nice of them." Amy plunged her spoon into the other half of the orange. "Heavens, but I'm going to be busy today! I've got a hair appointment at ten—a Lady's Counsel for the Underprivileged meeting at two—there are *so* many of them. The underprivileged, I mean . . ."

Walt wasn't listening. He was busy pondering. What sort of a collapse did he stand on the edge of without knowing it?

The reason he still didn't know after all those phone calls was logical—at least on his social level. On the tier where he and Amy dwelt, you always stood by your friends who got themselves into jams. But you were tactful. When you called to check in as a loyal ally, you assumed the other guy knew what you were being loyal about and you didn't rub it in. You spoke your quick piece and got off the line, for others would be calling in.

And if you were on the receiving end of all that sympathy you didn't want to look like an idiot by asking why. Any man who didn't know the extent of his own troubles, even at breakfast, went way down in the ratings.

So Walt finished his orange, ate his eggs, and munched his dry toast while checking mentally through his portfolio. Which company had collapsed? What bank president had been indicted for glomming the assets? It was an intriguing guessing game, but nerve-wracking when the stakes were high.

Then Walt pushed the two top papers aside, saw the front page of the *News*, and almost swallowed his uppers. He stared. He read. He looked. He didn't believe it. He was still in bed having a nightmare from last night's marinated lobster. But there it was. The *News* headline read:

TYCOON'S DAUGHTER CLOBBERS FUZZ

There was also a full-page photo of what had gone

on at the U.N. the previous day. Walt goggled at it like a man who's just been slugged.

There was a cop. There was a black guy in a nightgown and a turban. There was a girl in a crazy dress. And there was—yeah—no doubt about it—there was Bridget.

The cop and the black guy were having at each other. The girl in the funny dress was trying to hold her skirt together. Her back was to the camera and the *News* editor had blurred the film in the area of the girl's posterior where there wasn't any skirt; this in order to make the photo printable.

And heavenly days, there was Bridget with her teeth clenched and her legs braced, bringing a two-by-four around in a lethal arc. The club had just connected with the back of the cop's head as the picture was snapped—a masterly bit of photography that might win a blue ribbon later because the cop had received the message at that exact second and his eyes were slightly crossed.

"What is it dear?" Amy asked.

Walt made an unintelligible sound as he read the caption under the picture:

Bridget Steinberg, daughter of moneyed Wall Streeter, Walter Fitzgerald, lays it on Officer Igor Kowalski in front of the U.N. Building. The dispute arose over a militant effort to annul the immigration laws.

"Walt, dear? What's troubling you?"

Battling for self-control, he could only push the paper across the table.

"Tell me," Amy said. "My glasses are upstairs."

Walt was not hard to get along with. He was a good husband with a reasonable, understanding disposition. But there was a limit—times when even a velvet glove would irritate. Then too, in cases of sheer crisis, most people try to avoid the issue by slipping into obstructing by-ways.

So Walt said, "Good Godfrey, Amy! Why do you paw your way downstairs like a blind moose when you've got four pairs of glasses? Two with diamond chips in the rims yet!"

Uncle Moe, in classifying the Fitzgeralds, had called Amy a *chatzkah*. In Yiddish that meant a toy—winsome—a person of likable, empty-headed innocence. Accurate or not, Amy was just right for Walt because she always made their fights one-sided. Fighting with Amy was like trying to bat a shadow off the wall.

"But dear," she replied. "I'm not that blind, really. I get up and down stairs fine. It's just that I'm a little farsighted, and—"

"A little! I've seen you reach for the sugar bowl and poke your finger clear across the table into my soup."

"Why that's foolish. You know I'm on a diet. I haven't touched sugar for weeks now except for a little on my steak now and then."

"On your steak! Who in their right mind puts sugar on steak?"

"When we have that sauce from Maggie Heintz' recipe, a little sugar takes the taste of mayonnaise away."

"If you don't want to taste the mayonnaise why put it in?"

"But you have to. The recipe calls for it. Actually, the sugar adds subtly to the salt flavor."

"Then why not just use salt?"

"Dear, you don't understand French cooking. I think maybe you've been going to the Steinberg delicatessen too often—eating too many of those Ticker Tape Specials that Sophie makes."

Walt didn't agree, but Amy's reference was comforting. It reminded him that he was not alone in this crisis; that his Bridget was married to the Steinberg's Bernie. That gave them a hefty stake in the current disgrace. The thing to do was go there immediately and pool resources toward a solution.

There was much to be done and Walt wondered why the Steinbergs hadn't gotten in touch with him. There was bail to be put up for Bridget's release, although the Steinbergs had probably already done that. The best battery of lawyers in town had to be gathered in and integrated into a keen fighting force. Also, there were reporters to be fended off, columnists to be called and buttered up. So much to be done.

So he hurried off to contribute his presence, leaving Amy still unenlightened as to the perilous state of their affairs.

He knew of course, that the deli would be closed and shuttered. The Jews were a proud people and the Stein-

bergs were not exceptions. They would be locked up and hiding in the basement until the storm passed over.

Well, hardly.

As Walt paid off his cabby he looked around to make sure he was on the right street. There was a deli there all right, but it was open and booming, the hero sandwich addicts in to trip with their favorites and stall off the jitters until lunch time.

Walt went on inside. Sophie was busy at the sandwich counter. Sam was mixing salads. Uncle Moe was sitting on an orange crate reading a book entitled, *Some Aspects of the Sicilian Defense.*

Walt stared about and exclaimed, "What *is* this?"

Sam caught his question. "It's a delicatessen. Hey, Sophie. Walt's here."

Sophie raised her head as she slapped tomato on pickle anchored to lettuce with salami slices.

"One ticker tape coming up," she caroled.

Walt waved a negative hand. "I don't get it. How can you be open and running with Bridget in jail?"

Sam looked again to make sure it *was* Walt. Then he called to Sophie, "Walt says they jugged our daughter-in-law. You know anything about it?"

"She came down for a loaf of rye and went back upstairs the last I saw of her."

"But it's all over the *Daily News.* She clobbered—she assaulted a policeman."

Uncle Moe closed his book. "That rag! You can't believe a word they print. They said Fischer was unreasonable in his demands against the Russian. The *New York Post.* Now there's a newspaper!"

"Will somebody tell me what's going on? I read it in the paper one way and I come down here and find it another. Where's Bridget?"

"Upstairs with her loaf of rye, I guess. Unless she sneaked out through the storeroom."

Walt headed for the second floor. He pounded on the panel. He pounded and pounded and finally turned the knob and walked in and found Bridget stretched on the floor reading a book on how to make antique furniture look genuine when it wasn't.

"Oh, hello, Father."

"Why didn't you open the door?"

"It wasn't locked. And nobody ever knocks around here. I thought it was Uncle Moe fixing that hole in the ceiling downstairs." Bridget came to her feet. "You look—" She was going to say, *like U.S. Steel just folded*. But that would have been too cruel even in jest, so she switched to, "You look distraught."

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you in jail? I mean—I'm sorry. The Steinbergs are humane people. They would have bailed you out. But when I was downstairs they didn't seem to know anything about it. I'm confused, Bridget. I'm truly confused."

"Well that makes two of us, Daddy. If there's any way I can help—"

"Everybody wants to help. Willy Farrington—Percy Hart—Mark Reynolds. But nobody tells me anything. All I know is what I read in the papers."

"You mean the *Wall Street Journal* is talking about *me*?"

"The *Daily News*."

"That rag. You can't believe a word they print. You should have seen what they said about Fischer. The *New York Post*—now there's a newspaper."

"My God! They've not only brain-washed you but they've got you sounding like an echo. It must be the Jewish World Conspiracy. Come home with me, baby."

"This is my home, Daddy. Tell me, what did the *News* say?"

"It's not what they said so much as what they showed. Right on the front page. You trying to brain a minion of the law with a two-by-four. And what's this about letting every Tom, Dick, and Harry into the country? We've had a healthy appetite for foreigners over the years, but just how fast do you think we can digest them?"

Most of that went right through Bridget's head and out again. "Why that's ridiculous," she objected. "I was only carrying a protest sign and I didn't brain—what did you call him—a minion?"

"But it's right there in the picture!"

"Pictures can be doctored up. I've always suspected that the *News* has more full-time touch-up artists than—"

"Bridget! Don't evade the issue. You were at the U.N. You did have a two-by-four in your hands. It did hit a policeman and knock him cross-eyed."

"Well, if you put it that way. But it was all a mistake. I think that policeman is probably laughing about it right now."

"With the headache he must have? Bridget! Be

realistic. Who was the colored gentleman in the nightgown?"

"I only met him fleetingly. That's the only way I really met any of them."

"The girl with nothing on under her skirt?"

"Oh, Laura. Nobody saw anything, though. She fixed it quick."

"Not quick enough for that scaly *News* cameraman."

"I really can't tell you too much because Freddy was there and he rode me away on his hot dog cart."

Walt collapsed into a chair and tenderly took Bridget's hand into his.

"Baby! You do the weirdest things, but I know why. I understand you."

"All right then, Daddy—tell me. Why?"

"It's not because you're stupid."

"Thank you."

"You're highly intelligent. It's just that you've got too big a heart. You just can't say no to anyone."

"Oh, I said no dozens of times before I got married."

"I didn't mean that way. I meant you're the world's softest touch. Like the time you gave a man a hundred shares of my IBM stock at the back door just because he lisped and wore an arm band reading *Give*."

"I remember that. He was starting a home in the Poconos for retired mountain men."

"And even when you were a pigtailed imp and you gave your bicycles to kids in the park because they didn't have any of their own." Walt's eyes softened as he remembered his beloved daughter's early years.

"You kept giving bicycles away and I kept buying you new ones—"

"That was so silly of me I know, Daddy."

Walt squeezed the hand he was holding. "I'm not so sure about that. But anyhow, I just want you to stay out of trouble. If somebody comes to you with a gimmick, check it out, honey. Call up the Better Business Bureau. Inquire of the State Attorney and Bess Myerson. They'll give you solid advice."

"I promise."

Walt came briskly to his feet. Sentiment was all right in its place but too much of it could blur a man's judgment. "Well, if everything's okay, I'll get down to the shop. When are you and Bernie coming for dinner?"

"Tell mother soon."

Walt kissed his daughter and left . . .

Downstairs, Sophie saw him and beamed a smile along with A Ticker Tape Special she had ready. "Take a little time, Mr. Fitzgerald. Slow down. Sit with Uncle Moe in the back and eat this sandwich."

"No time to spare," Walt said. "Put it in a bag and I'll take it with me."

Sophie sighed. They were all in such a rush . . .

Back in the plushly carpeted, beautifully furnished shop on Wall Street, Mark Reynolds hurried over and reached for Walt's hand.

"So sorry, old man. If there's anything—"

Walt retrieved his digits. "Sorry for what?"

"I saw it in the *Daily News*."

"That rag? You can't believe a word they print. Now

the *New York Post*. There's a newspaper."

Mark Reynolds shuddered and drew away. Walt went on toward his office. He felt great. Probably, he thought, because Amy had switched from that frozen stuff to fresh oranges. Good girl, Amy. He'd stop at Tiffany's on the way home and buy her a new bauble . . .

FOUR

The pigeon stood on the window sill and looked into the bedroom with one eye. Then it turned its head and looked in with the other.

Evidently this was the place because it then hopped on in and perched on the foot of the bed. It looked at Bridget who was sleeping peacefully and made a remark in pigeon language, possible about people who slept their lives away.

Bridget *was* sleeping late but there was a reason. She and Bernie had wanted to see a new movie on Fifty-ninth Street and they'd had to stand in line two hours to catch the midnight show. That got them home pretty late.

Poor Bernie could not afford the luxury of late sleeping because Otis arrived early and began honking downstairs, demanding that Bernie come take his rightful place behind the wheel of the cab.

So Bridget woke him up and said, "Poor baby," and went back to sleep and there she was.

It was eleven o'clock now and even if the pigeon had known the circumstances it would probably have felt

that Bridget should have been awake anyhow.

The pigeon seemed to be looking for something. It hopped to the floor and walked into the living room. It flew up to the top of the highboy and perched there, complaining softly. Obviously, from its point of view, something was wrong. It went over and sat on the needlepoint—with no disastrous results, providentially.

Then it went back into the bedroom and sat down on Bridget's chest as though planning to nest there. That was when Bridget came alive. She opened her eyes and saw the pigeon and made a logical decision. She wasn't really awake yet. She was still asleep and having a dream—like Alice in Birdland and the pigeon was there to tell her something.

The pigeon talked softly, telling Bridget things. Bridget of course didn't understand, but it did clear her mind. She opened her eyes wider and muttered, "What the—" not finishing, and sat up.

"Well, what do you want?" she demanded.

She didn't understand the bird's reply but it must have sounded like, *I'm hungry*, because Bridget said, "Well, there's half of a Late Late Movie Special out on the table."

Bridget got out of bed and picked the bird up and took it to the sandwich. Then she went about seeing to her own needs. She could have called down the stairwell for coffee, but Uncle Moe would probably have come with it, and started yakking about Fischer so she went to the kitchenette and made a cup of instant.

When she came back, it seemed that the pigeon had

misunderstood. It thought the half-eaten sandwich was something that needed hatching because it was sitting on mutilated masterpiece, cooing to it.

As Bridget entered, the pigeon stood up and it was then that she saw the aluminum cylinder fastened to its pink leg.

She went grumpily over to investigate. "What do you do? Work for Western Union or something?" she muttered as she removed the cylinder.

As she opened it, the pigeon continued to coo, perhaps saying, *Sign here*, or pigeon words to that effect.

The cylinder had a screw top. Bridget unscrewed it and took out a tightly folded bit of white paper. This she unfolded and came really awake because the message, printed in neat block letters, read:

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE—*CALL* ME!!!

Bridget sat down and stared at the pigeon. She told herself automatically that this was ridiculous, not to mention impossible, ludicrous, and insane.

But there was the note and there was the pigeon.

Bridget's first idea was that some joker was at work. Would Uncle Moe have dreamed this one up? It was possible.

Bridget went musingly into the bedroom and regarded the open window with some speculation. She crossed over to do the Sherlock Holmes bit and found a small pile of residue on the sill that said a pigeon had passed that way.

So the joker theory was out. The pigeon had come in the window with its message and was now busy trying to hatch a sandwich.

This irritated Bridget—this along with other developments—and she picked up the pigeon and took it back to the window.

"Shoo," she ordered. "Go back to the office and tell 'em nobody was home."

The pigeon flew across Lexington Avenue and lit on a bar that supported a roof sign plugging the Chinese restaurant downstairs.

Turning back into the room, Bridget pondered. Standing there with the creepy note in her hand, there didn't seem to be any way to go.

Certain logical answers did present themselves. From the phone calls and the note, Oliver obviously thought she had *his* phone number. And his persistence indicated that calling him must be important.

She strolled restlessly back to the window, feeling a little guilty for having thrown the pigeon out. The bird *had* come in good faith.

She discovered that it had found a friend. A brown pigeon was seated next to it and they were talking. Then it looked as though the brown one had been briefing the messenger on things of the pigeon world because they took off together, back across the street, and vanished.

But not until an angry passer-by looked up and said bad words in their direction while wiping his sleeve.

Bridget went on with her pondering. Not for long, however, because she ran suddenly into the bedroom,

pulled on a sweater and slacks, and went downstairs . . .

Bridget found Uncle Moe weeping copiously. He was seated in the back on a yogurt crate peeling onions. He looked up and smiled sadly.

"Why on earth don't you wear goggles?" Bridget asked.

This only deepened Uncle Moe's sad smile. "No way. I'm doing this for my people."

"Crazy. How can you help your people by bawling your heart out over a bag of onions?"

"Well, someone has to weep for them. So while I peel, I think of all the injustices over the centuries. That way, this sack of onions becomes my wailing wall. Oh, my poor people—my poor people."

And Uncle Moe went back to work.

"Crazy," Bridget repeated, and went forward to find that Sam was spelling Sophie at the sandwich table with Sophie sitting behind the cash register drinking a cup of coffee.

This seemed like a splendid opportunity, so Bridget went to her side.

Sophie was giving change for a five. She handed out the bills and then swiftly inspected the coins to see if any of them might be collectors' items. Then she turned her eternal smile on Bridget and said, "Morning, honey. How about a Danish and coffee?"

Bridget shook her head. "Sophie, I was wondering about something—about who had our apartment upstairs before I married Bernie and we moved in."

"Why, honey? Did you find something we missed

when we cleaned? I thought we did a very good job. she was a nice girl, quiet and no trouble, but she *was* a little messy. Writing on the walls, dust under the refrigerator, the windows nowhere near sparkling clean the way we like to keep them. So after we looked the place over, we just papered throughout and bought the new stove and a new refrigerator."

"Because there was dust under it?"

"Lord no, child! We just wanted you to start new."

"That was sweet of you, Sophie. I appreciated it. But about the girl. What was her name?"

"Smith."

"Did she have a first name?"

"I never found out what it was. You see, she kept to herself pretty much. Once in a while she'd send down for an Eiffel Tower Special—"

"An Eiffel Tower Special? I've never seen that on the menu."

"We discontinued it. For a while we had some Frenchmen living in a brownstone over on Third Avenue, but they quit coming in so I guess they left."

"But you never heard the girl's first name?"

"No. A man signed the lease. I think he said he was her uncle. And he always sent a check for the rent. He signed the lease, J. R. Smith—a dollar twenty-six, thank you."

That last was for a customer who took his change and went out carrying a Steel Worker's Special under his arm like a beam for the new building down the block.

"Well, thanks, Sophie. I was just wondering . . ."

Bridget went back upstairs and continued to ponder. She wandered aimlessly through the apartment without seeing much.

It was a pleasant place to live. The Steinbergs had redecorated it beautifully, Also, they'd put in a second entrance. Before, there had been only a front stairway off the street with a fire escape in the back to conform with the fire laws.

But Sophie saw that as dangerous, what with every other person in the neighborhood seemingly a professional burglar, so she had badgered Sam to put in a back stairway leading into the store.

A nice place to live with the Steinbergs doing their best for a rich girl who was used to palatial quarters—trying hard to keep her from getting too homesick.

Bridget wandered and pondered. Then a few of her harassed brain cells got together and came up with an idea.

The idea sent Bridget down the back stairs with a query for the onion peeling member of the clan:

"Uncle Moe, do you remember where the phone was upstairs?"

"My poor people—my poor people! Huh! Oh, it's on the table by your bed. Did you forget?"

"I mean before—when the other girl lived up there."

"On the wall just outside the kitchenette. Why?"

"I just wondered . . . "

She went back upstairs and examined the wall by the new archway Sam had put in as a kitchenette entrance.

The wallpaper people had done a fine job. The ex-

pensive pastel-design cloth-backed paper gave no sign of a phone ever having been there.

Bridget sat down and looked at the paper for a while, struggling toward a decision. Then she got resolutely up, ran a pail of warm water, got a sponge, and went to work . . .

The paper was stubborn but it finally gave and telltale marks appeared. The screw holes for the phone had been carefully filled with plastic wood, a sign of professional craftsmanship, and Bridget also discovered that the previous paint job on the wall had been a shade of tannish yellow.

She kept on working and finally cleared the paper away from a section some three feet square.

Then she put her pail and sponge away and came back and read the telephone numbers written there on the section of paint she'd uncovered.

There were six of them. Bridget got the telephone book out and checked prefixes. She found that the numbers covered most of Manhattan. The previous tenant had not conversed exclusively with any particular section.

However, three of them zeroed in on Greenwich Village and after a period of doubt and trepidation, Bridget began dialing.

The first party answered with a pleasant, "Good morning and peace. Thanks for calling. What may I do for you?"

"Well, I don't know—"

"Don't weep for that, darling. Few of us do know, really. But we have new boots from Spain and old

boots from Kansas City. We have a shipment of peeky blouses from Oslo and—"

"What place is this?"

"Why, the Bent Twig Boutique, love. Didn't you *know?*"

"I was beginning to suspect," Bridget said, and hung up.

Next she tried an uptown number—somewhere on the other side of Central Park.

Snakey oriental music sounded as the receiver was lifted, and Bridget visualized an oriental dancer sinewing about with a diamond in her navel.

But the greeting was anti-social. "What'd ya want?"

Bridget took a deep breath and replied, "I'd like to speak to Oliver."

The sneer was raucous. "You kidding?"

"No. Is Oliver there?"

"Sure he's here. Oliver."

Bridget got the impression Oliver was coming to the phone. Raucous Voice said, "Go ahead, speak. Give out with great truths."

There was the sound of panting and then the deep-throated bark of a dog that had to be big. No Pekinese, Oliver.

Bridget slammed the phone down. "I call in good faith and get dogs, yet!" she complained.

Back to the Village. At least they were civil down there, and she had two numbers left.

The next voice was deep, masculine, and unless Bridget's imagination was putting her on, a trifle sinister.

"May I speak to Oliver?"

The pause was far longer than seemed logical to Bridget. Yet its very length suggested caution that might well go with the mystique Bridget had conjured up around the tantalyzing anonymity of Mister O. The longer the pause, the surer she was.

"Who wants him?"

"I—my name is Bridget. He's been calling me."

"Is that so? What did he say?"

"I don't know. I've never been in when he called."

Another long pause. "Are you in trouble?"

"Why, no. I'm not in any trouble. Who is this? Are you Oliver?"

"I might be."

"Then what did you want?"

"I said I *might* be."

"That means you are," Bridget said.

"Okay. Meet me in Donegan's on Bleecker Street. One hour."

The phone clicked.

Bridget picked up what was left of the sandwich on the table. Then she remembered the Western Union pigeon had parked on it and took it to the kitchen and the garbage pail.

To go or not to go. Bridget's common sense said, forget it, kid. But her curiosity and sense of adventure pooh-poohed that. It said, Don't be a timid Tessie. Make for an exciting afternoon. Go down and see the cat. It won't necessarily enrich your life, but it will fill in a little of the time until school opens again.

Bridget saw that as sound thinking. Perhaps she

would have left immediately but there was an interruption. Bernie thundered up the steps and blazed into the room. He was in a state of high excitement.

This cooled a trifle though, when he saw the wall. He pointed. "What—?"

Bridget thought fast. "I—well, I got a spot on the wall and tried to wash it off."

"A spot! What did you do? Bump into it with a sandwich in each hand?"

"It was a little spot at first, but it kept moving, kind of. Then the wallpaper loosened up and I tried to make the spot square so it would look neat, and one rub of the sponge led to another and—"

"Never mind. We can put Band-aids on it. The thing is, I've got it, angel! I've really got it!"

"You've got what?"

"The idea for my play. You know how long I've been hunting for it! Well, it came! So I'm getting to work on it. Right now!"

"Wonderful! I'll dust your typewriter off."

He came forward quickly and put his arms around her. "Honey—not here."

"Where then?"

"I'm going to a hotel and lock myself in—where I won't be disturbed."

"But I promise not to even breathe."

"It's not you, baby. It's the rest of them. Uncle Moe schlepping in at all hours. Mom yelling up the stairs to ask if I want chicken soup. Dad kicking the walls to keep the termites on edge so they can't eat the floor beams. Stuff like that. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course, darling."

And she truly did. The play meant so much to Bernie. And he did have talent. Bridget was sure of it. So the idea of Bernie not getting his chance really chilled her.

"I'll keep in touch of course, baby. As soon as I hole up I'll call and tell you where I am. But don't tell anybody else. They'll be climbing in the windows."

"I'll just say I don't know."

"Okay, hon. I'll get going right now . . . "

After he was gone, Bridget sat down and muttered, "Well, that was a quick exit. In and out in stop-watch time." But she was so excited by the emergence of Bernie's urge that all else went by the boards. He'd taken only his portable with him but he wouldn't need much. When she found out where he would land, she'd mail him a tooth brush. He wouldn't need any clothes because he always wrote in his shorts.

So when the dust had finally settled, Bridget went back to her own problem. The man had said an hour. That left forty-five minutes, fifteen minutes having been used up in losing a husband to the arts.

With no more hesitancy, she went in to put on a face and was soon ready. Then, just as she was about to leave, she remembered something, or rather, someone—a good-looking city employee she'd known in other days.

Hoping he was still around, she called the correct department at City Hall and asked for Jimmy Lane.

"This is Jimmy Lane."

"Jimmy! Bridget—Bridget Steinberg—I mean Fitzgerald. How have you been?"

"Okay, chick, and I can tell you how you are without asking."

"How, darling?"

"Married."

"Uh-huh."

"I gather you didn't call to accept my proposal from last year."

"I've still got it on file. But Jimmy, I need a favor."

"Hmmm. It can't be money. Your old man is loaded—"

"It's a phone number. I've got the number and I want the address and name. Once you told me you did that sort of thing for the police."

"Sure. Are you the police?"

"No, but I'm an old friend."

"Sorry, strictly against the rules. But just out of curiosity, what's the number?"

Bridget gave it to him and there were a couple minutes of silence.

Then Jimmy Lane came back. "Too bad you aren't the police. If you were I could tell you the guy's name is Clay Grant and that he lives at Forty-one Great Jones Street. But as it is, I can't tell you a thing. Unless of course, you've got a court order."

"I'll get one! Thanks for briefing me on what's required."

"I suppose inviting you for a drink some afternoon is out of line?"

"Why? Just because I got married I didn't go on the wagon."

"Okay. What's your number?"

"If you can get a court order, call back and I'll tell you what it is," she replied. Then she read off the number so he'd know where to call to get it. "And to save you checking it out, it's upstairs over a delicatessen on Lexington Avenue . . . "

Five minutes later, Bridget was in a cab, riding south . . .

FIVE

Donegan's on Bleecker Street was behind a sagging front with a beer sign in each of two small windows and a sign under the name reading, *Go-Go Dancing Every Night.*

It wasn't yet night so the dancing girls were elsewhere as Bridget entered and peered into a cavernous place with a long bar, a small stage in the back, and tables spotted aimlessly about.

The place was empty except for a barkeep lounging behind a copy of the *Telegraph* and a man hunched over a stein at one of the tables.

Bridget waited. The barkeep ignored her. She could have gone to the bar and made inquiry but she hesitated to walk on all the helpless cigarette butts that were strewn in that direction.

So she boldly approached the lone man at the table and said, "Are you Oliver?"

He raised bored eyes; bored perhaps, but with something steely in them. He wasn't bad-looking but his face

resembled a mask, the features frozen into a flat expression reflecting nothing.

"Sit down."

"I only wanted to—"

"Sit down."

Bridget dropped into the opposite chair. "I'm sure there's been some mistake. But I got curious—all those phone calls, and—"

She stopped, common sense interrupting her. Common sense now leered from within and said, I *told* you to stay home.

"Let me see your arm," the man said.

"Now just a minute—"

But he'd already seized her wrist and pushed her sweater sleeve well above her elbow.

"What are you doing?"

He scowled. "Smooth as a baby's. No needle marks. Who are you? What are you here for—a buy?"

"I'm just trying to find out who Oliver is."

"Who sent you?"

Before Bridget could answer, the barkeep cleared his throat noisily. Immediately, Oliver or Clay Grant or whoever he was, got up from the table and headed for the back door.

Immediately two men entered through the front door. They looked lazily around the place. They were past youth, moving into middle age, and even to Bridget's uneducated eye, their appearance shouted, plainclothesmen.

One moved on toward the bar, heartlessly smashing

those cigarette butts. The other one came toward Bridget.

"Hi, sister. How's the girl?"

Bridget arose. "I was just leaving."

"Good idea."

"I beg your pardon!"

"What for?" he asked mildly. Then he strolled toward the bar and Bridget swept out of the place, her cheeks burning.

Back in a cab headed for home, she thought it over and realized she couldn't blame the man. It was her fault. If you put yourself in a place and a position to be insulted, someone was always sure to come along and accommodate you.

But then she found herself smiling. Now that any possible danger had passed it was a little thrilling, really. Like a glance into an alien world Bridget had heard about but never seen. She'd been to the Village before, but always with an escort or in a group, never alone, and folks out for a night on the town saw dives like Donegan's in a different light.

Now she laughed, wondering how Bernie would have reacted. She sighed. In his present mood he'd probably try to find a spot for the incident in his play . . .

Back upstairs over the deli, Bridget found Otis parked morosely in the living room.

"Take your feet off the needlework," she said automatically.

He looked hurt. "They aren't on the needlework. If

you'll put on your glasses and look closely, you'll see them on the floor."

"Sorry—I guess. Why aren't you out earning a living?"

"I came to find out what hit him."

"What hit whom?"

"Your crazy husband. The cat that left our cab parked by a plug and took off. You seen him?"

"He came home. Then he went somewhere to write a play."

"Where?"

"It's a secret."

"Well, it's no secret where our cab is. At the car pound."

"They hauled it away?"

"They didn't paint it red and squirt water out of it."

"Bernie got an inspiration."

"Well, I hope he's got fifty dollars to buy our crate back."

"I'm sure he'll straighten things out when he gets his play written."

"They'll have the new models out by that time and we'll be driving an antique."

"That's the trouble. Nobody has faith in Bernie."

"I got faith in him. But I'd like to have the cab too."

Somehow, with so much on her mind, the cab didn't seem important to Bridget. She frowned and said, "Otis, I'm in trouble—well, kind of."

"Welcome to the club. The dues are fifty bucks, payable in advance."

"I think maybe I need your advice."

"Okay, but in the meantime, how's your petty cash account?"

"I can let you have thirty dollars. That'll leave me ten until I can get to the bank."

"Okay. I'll take twenty out of my crazy fund."

"Your crazy fund?"

"A reserve to patch up the crazy things my partner does. But it's kind of low at the moment."

Bridget got the thirty for Otis and said, "I'm in a spot and I just don't know what to do—"

"Hold it for an hour. I can't advise very good while my baby is in the pound with all those Caddies and Royces. She might get expensive ideas like wanting hi-test gas. See you in an hour . . ."

Alone, Bridget felt restless and took to the streets. She didn't see the joker in the red sweater until she'd wandered around the block twice. Then she became vaguely aware of his presence as he stayed right on her tail.

She walked south and came to one of those cute little ideas the powers had turned into reality. Mini-parks—places where buildings had been torn down and instead of erecting parking lots, the city had created small oases with tables and chairs where citizens could stop off and rest their feet if there was room.

Bridget found a vacant table and sat down. The red sweater wandered in also and dawdled by the fountain. Bridget got up and went home. Her tail had business in that direction also. Bridget went upstairs and looked

out the window. He was gone, or so it seemed. But that didn't prove that he wasn't around somewhere . . .

Otis arrived ten minutes later. He'd stopped downstairs for a Soul Brother Special and was munching it contentedly.

"It's the black raspberry jam that makes it. You were saying—?"

"Otis, I think I'm being followed."

He glanced appreciatively at Bridget's figure. "What else is of interest currently?"

"You don't understand."

"Honey—just because I'm a rich chocolate brown—"

"Oh stop it and listen to me . . ."

Bridget told him the whole thing with all the details she could remember, starting with Oliver's first phone call.

"You were stupid, following it up," Otis said tactfully as he regarded the uncovered phone numbers on the wall.

"As you just said, what else is of current interest?"

He pondered as he finished his sandwich. "You may be in a bind with that cat in the Village. He a pusher, that's for sure and those guys may or may not be tough. You can't tell. In your case, he could be tough. Now the way he might see it is that you're bait the fuzz dropped in the pond. After all, you showed up and two cops followed you right in."

"But that was only coincidence."

"Sure, but does he see it that way? Now this dude that you say was trailing you. Are you sure?"

"No. I just noticed that he went every place I went."

"That's about how shadows work."

"What can I do?"

Otis was up prowling the apartment. He wandered into the bedroom and came out with a note.

"I found this propped on the phone," he said.

"Oh, no! Not again!"

She took the note as though afraid it would grow teeth and bite her. It read:

> *Oliver called. Why don't you call him back? This is getting monotonous.*
>
> *Love*
>
> *Uncle Moe.*

"Do you suppose he wants to threaten me with death?"

"Look—we don't even know for sure it's the same guy. He didn't admit that he was Oliver, you said."

"He didn't deny it either."

"But the number you called was somebody else. A cat named Clay Grant. And he was the one you met."

"But you said he was a pusher and such people could be devious."

"It's been known to happen."

"Whatever can I do?"

"I think a straightforward policy is best."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We go to that address and brace the dude. We lay it on the line. It shouldn't be too hard to convince him

who we are and that we're innocent bystanders."

"But if we know he's a pusher shouldn't we tell the police?"

"Honey, they know more than we do. They didn't come into that joint after a beer."

"Well, if you think we ought to go down there."

"Open and above board. Guys like that don't want trouble. They just want reassurance. Of course the cops may have picked him up already, but we better not depend on that."

"But why should you get mixed up in it?"

"Don't talk like that. I've got a call. We run a cat down to the Empire State from Central Park West every day at this time. I'll deliver him and come back. You be ready . . ."

Otis breezed out. Bridget sat looking at Oliver's latest plea. Twice she went to the phone to dial Clay Grant's number and twice she drew away.

Maybe Otis was right. A head-to-head confrontation would leave nobody in doubt. After all, why should Grant suspect a girl with a good upbringing and a Fifth Avenue background? Maybe she ought to go to a few of her friends and get some character references to bolster her case?

Otis was a hip cat, though. He knew his way around. He wouldn't have suggested the plan unless he was sure he could convince Grant that she was harmless.

But why drag Otis into it? She hadn't gone to him in the first place for help. Only for advice. And she

thought his advice was good. And if Otis could convince the man, why couldn't she? Why not? She wasn't exactly tongue-tied.

So she wrote a note and laid it carefully on the needlepoint where Otis would be sure to put his feet while waiting for her:

> *Thanks for your wonderful advice. dear. I don't know why I didn't think of it myself. But you've got a cab to drive. See you when I get back.*
>
> *Oodles & oodles,*
> *Bridget*

Then she took off . . .

Two hours later, Otis got back and honked from the street with no results. He swore dark oaths and then was lucky enough to be behind a dude just pulling out of a parking meter.

Otis slipped in behind him and went upstairs and found the note. In sheer disgust, he dropped into a chair and parked his feet on the needlepoint and sat there exhausted from trying to keep abreast of female zaniness.

Then he got wearily up and headed for the Village without getting more than two cents benefit from the dime he'd put in the meter . . .

The number on Great Jones Street was a run-down brownstone with little to recommend it other than the fact that it was still standing.

Otis looked it over from the walk and then climbed the stairs where a mailbox in the foyer told him that one Clay Grant did live there—in Apt. 206.

He went up to investigate. The door was open. The apartment, a one-room efficiency, was stripped to the grimy walls.

The phone was still working. This indicated Grant had taken off not too long ago. The way Otis figured it, the two cops had been on Grant's tail and after the incident at the bar, he'd split. The empty apartment had probably been only a drop with little more in it but a folding bed and a chair. When dudes like Grant settled in they did it very lightly with nothing to trip over on the way out.

So, as things stood, Grant obviously couldn't have cared less about Bridget. She'd imagined the whole thing.

He went down and checked with the super who hadn't seen any girl arrive in search of Grant. After that he went back upstairs and had a phone call on the absent Grant. He called the deli and told Uncle Moe to tell Bridget she would be wasting her time going to the Village. This, in case she had been delayed in starting. If not, she'd find out for herself in due time.

These obligations having been met, Otis climbed back into his cab and got on with the business of making a living . . .

Bridget did not get home for dinner that night. This did not cause any great concern at the deli because they figured she'd gone to visit her folks. So when Bernie called that evening, Sophie told him she was out. This didn't bother Bernie because her absence from home didn't necessarily mean that she was in the East River with a rock around her ankle.

Otis, for his part, was so annoyed with everybody in general that they could all have been in the East River for all he cared.

Otis, though he didn't let it hang out, had a low opinion of women in some ways. Logically, he thought, they were for the birds. He'd never met one yet who could think in a straight line.

He had deep respect for the intelligence of only two females—his mother, who'd raised him single-handedly, and his girl Glenda because she refused to marry him until he finished getting his degree at night school.

Glenda was a dreamboat. There was competition from other cats for her favor, so Otis spent all his spare time trying to stay ahead. And now, with no one to spell him on the cab, he had very little spare time. Therefore, he tended to forget about the affairs of the Steinbergs and concentrated on his own.

Bernie called the next morning and found that Bridget wasn't home again. He thought it over for a minute or so, not to take his mind off his second act, and decided she was bugged from the neglect. He made a note of that as something to take care of later, and went back to work.

But Uncle Moe gave it a little more thought. He remembered she hadn't been home last night either and went upstairs to check. He found the bed not messed up but that didn't send him into a panic because she might have come home and slept and made the bed before going out again.

He was trifle uneasy, though. The apartment smelled empty—kind of—or something like that. This made him think a little more and he wondered now why Bernie kept calling home from someplace else. And he realized he hadn't seen either of them for quite some time. He tried to figure out how long and couldn't.

He went downstairs and found Sophie slicing tomatoes for the noon rush.

"Did Bridget and Bernie have a fight?" he asked.

"No doubt," Sophie replied. "Why?"

"I was wondering. What did they fight about?"

"How should I know?"

"Then how did you know they fought?"

"All young couples fight. It's normal. You show me a young couple that doesn't fight once in a while and I'll show you a couple of kids with no spirit."

"When did they come down to eat last?"

"I should keep track of such things?"

"Any idea where Bernie went?"

"Did he go some place?"

"He phoned twice."

"And you ask me where he went. You were the one who talked to him."

By that time, Uncle Moe suspected Sophie was in a

snappish mood. Under such conditions she always snapped at people. He decided they'd had a fight and Bridget was home with her folks with Bernie living in the back seat of the cab.

Uncle Moe had great faith in the biological urge correcting all such situations, though, so he went back to his onions and his weeping.

Around noon the following day, Otis called. He'd forgotten about Bridget's crazy apprehensions of the previous day and was calling to find out when Bernie was coming back to the job. He tried the apartment and then the store.

Sam answered the phone. "Me, I just work here. Nobody tells me anything. They ignore me and eat hot dogs in front of my shop."

"If you see either Bridget or Bernie, tell 'em to call me at home, will you?"

So Bridget's whereabouts remained a mystery—a mystery no one was aware of, with Bernie's address of the moment not known either.

The only clue, that might have started corrective action was a letter delivered into the Fitzgerald mailbox by hand. It was a missive made up of words clipped from newspapers:

> *We have Bridget in our custody.*
> *Instructions for her release will*
> *appear in the Personal column of*
> *the* New York Times.

However, Amy misjudged the letter as being a piece of junk mail. She always threw the junk mail away before turning the rest of it over to Walt. This had resulted in the loss of a few dividend checks, but Walt never missed them . . .

SIX

Actually, Bridget wasn't having too rough a time. It was rather primitive in comparison to what she was used to, but as kidnapping went, it wasn't so bad.

There was this huge, deserted place which might have been almost anything before it was converted into a place to hide Bridget. She was upstairs somewhere, she was sure of that, because the windows in the place showed only blank sky—no horizon. And the silence was heavy as lead.

Her kidnappers, when they took her, wore nylon stockings over their faces, thus showing only distorted features during the moments before she was blindfolded. No drugs were used, but they did gag her after they got tired of listening to her complaints.

Then when they got to where they were going, she saw only a thin young man named Cliff. He was in charge, obeying orders from up above, and wearing his nylon stocking all the time. He never seemed to eat or sleep or drink. Nor would he answer any of the questions Bridget kept asking.

Bridget's gag was removed and she was not totally restrained; only partially so. There was a heavy iron cot, too heavy to budge, and a chair, and her ankle was chained to a leg of the cot, unlocked only when Bridget had to go to the bathroom.

This offered no escape route however. It was windowless and so lacking in ventilation that Bridget got in and out as soon as possible.

So aside from being chained to the bed, Bridget did not fare badly. Cliff was a lad who obeyed orders to the letter and he had been ordered to make Bridget as comfortable as possible, to grant every desire that it was humanly possible to fulfill.

Thus, he turned up the very first night, without his nylon stocking, to ask the head waiter at the *French Rendevouz* if he could get an order of *Boeuf Bourguignon* to take out.

When told this was impossible, he shlepped over to the Steinberg Delicatessen and settled for a Mailbag Special. Bridget liked the extra lox Sophie put in that one. There was a big Post Office just down the block from the deli and mail carriers, it seemed, like lox also.

There was no phone in the hideout, but Cliff kept in touch with the front office with a walkie-talkie.

When he called, the same person always answered, a felon Bridget came to know in her mind as the Voice.

The Voice checked at intervals to see that all was well, and Cliff called back at times—usually with a complaint:

"I want to be relieved. This broad is for the birds. In the first place, she talks too much. Yak, yak, yak. All

the time she isn't asleep. Can I gag her?"

"Of course not," the Voice replied. "That would be inhuman."

"Ask him if his name is Oliver," Bridget said.

"Shut up," Cliff retorted. "Don't you think I know his name?"

"Well, is it Oliver?"

"No."

"What's going on there?" the Voice asked. "Who are you talking to?"

"Who do you suppose? I told you she yakked all the time. And she keeps wanting crazy things."

"Well, keep her happy."

"Roger," Cliff sighed dismally and signed off.

"Roger who?" Bridget asked.

"The Lodger," Cliff replied. "Will you please shut up."

Cliff did make a dialogue out of it once in a while. When Bridget asked, "How long are you going to keep me here?" he said, "Until a certain person starts reading the *New York Times*."

"Doesn't everybody?"

"That decadent sheet? They're lucky to make enough money to pay their printer."

"I think you've been misled. The *Times* is one of the world's great newspapers."

"Huh? No comics. No jokes."

"No jokes! Have you read any of their editorials?"

"I like the *New York Post*. It's got Peanuts and Jack Anderson . . . "

"What school did you go to, Cliff?"

"UCLA for a while."

"They threw you out?"

"I quit. Where did you go?"

"Sarah Lawrence."

"You would!"

"Why do you say that? Aren't people entitled to go to school where they want to?"

"Like hell. Could I get into West Point?"

"Did you want to?"

"No."

"Then—"

"Oh, shut up."

If Bridget had been more tactful and patient, she could probably have made a friend out of Cliff. But she kept antagonizing him. Like:

"Cliff. Wake up."

"What do you want?"

"A malted. A chocolate malted."

"Good grief! It's three o'clock in the morning!"

"So?"

"There's no place open."

"Yes there is. A deli on Lexington Avenue."

"Where I go for those goofy sandwiches?"

"No. A block further south. They stay open all night."

"Go to sleep."

"And while you're there, bring me a dill pickle."

"No way."

"I'll complain. The next time you get the Voice on the horn I'll yell about your mistreating me. He said fulfill my every desire, remember?"

"Oh, hell!" And Cliff pushed off into the night.

In trying to figure out where she was, Bridget, had only Cliff's elapsed time to go by. The trips to Lexington Avenue took him about a half hour, so she couldn't have been so very far from home.

Further downtown, like Radio City, where she sent him to get the chain of her gold crucifix repaired, took longer. But all in all, she had a general fix on the location. Not more than ten or fifteen blocks from home.

So near and yet so far, she thought, and with Cliff temporarily absent, she went to work on the screws that held the iron cot to the floor. She'd broken all her fingernails without success, but had managed to loosen one slightly with the lucky dime she'd carried in her shoe since childhood—moving it from one shoe to another of course as her feet grew.

When he got back, Cliff gave her the malted and glared at her defiantly.

"No pickle!"

"How come?"

"I ate it on the way back."

This was a triumph of sorts for Cliff and Bridget knew how far she could push him. He would have definitely refused to go back for another one so she let it pass . . .

The following morning, Walt Fitzgerald waded into his half an orange with his three papers before him. A few minutes later, Amy arrived with the mail which she placed on the table.

Walt said, "By the way, have you heard anything from Bridget lately?"

Amy sighed. "Not for a while. I suppose she's busy learning everything Jewish. I don't think it's fair."

"What isn't fair?"

"The way marriage works. I think I'll join Women's Lib."

Walt was mildly interested. "And what brought that on?"

"As I said, the way marriage works. From feudal times it's been the custom of young men to take their brides off somewhere after marriage. They usually take them home—to *their* homes—where the boy's parents get their hands on them and turn them into something else."

"Where did you read all that?" Walt asked.

"I didn't read it. A Women's Lib advocate talked on the radio the other morning and told me."

"What was her idea?"

"Well, she said when women get *all* their rights, which shouldn't be so very long now, that will be reversed. The girl will go out and marry the boy and bring him home to *her* parents for brain-wash—I mean for conditioning into her way of life."

"This Women's-Libber—was she married?"

"I don't think so."

"Did she have any children?"

"Walt! Really!"

Walt might have had a reply, but he'd turned to the mail and was sorting through it.

"What's all this junk?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't have time to go through it. I usually throw all the junk away so you're not bothered with it."

Walt grunted and came to an odd-looking missive with no stamp. He passed it by and then went back to it.

"Looks like this one was delivered by hand."

"Oh, they put a lot of stuff in the box."

Walt opened the letter. It was printed with a ball point, neatly done. The big square letters would certainly have defied handwriting analysis.

Walt read it and scowled in perplexity. "What's this, Amy?"

"I don't know, darling, you're the one who's reading it."

"It says:

My Dear Mr. Fitzgerald:
THE GOON I DEPEND ON FOR ROUTINE JOBS BLEW IT AGAIN. INSTEAD OF PUTTING YOUR INSTRUCTIONS IN THE NEW YORK TIMES *UNDER PERSONALS HE PUT THEM IN THE* WALL STREET JOURNAL *UNDER BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES. THAT DELAYED THINGS BUT ALL IS NOT LOST. WHAT I DID WAS TO LEAVE THEM THERE INSTEAD OF SWITCHING BACK TO THE* TIMES *BECAUSE ALL I HAD TO DO WAS CALL THE* JOURNAL *AND TELL THEM TO*

RUN THE THING AGAIN. SO LOOK IN THE JOURNAL *TODAY FOR YOUR INSTRUCTIONS.*

"Crazy," Walt muttered. "What kind of a gimmick is it, do you think?"

"It's an attention getter," Amy said as she munched on dry toast, hating every bite because she'd been ordered off butter.

"What's that?"

"It's the way people work who have something to sell. Before they can sell you, they have to get your attention, so they think up any number of outlandish ways to do it. It's probably someone selling magazines or perhaps opening a pizza parlor somewhere in the neighborhood."

"We want no pizza parlors in this neighborhood," Walt replied grimly. "You show me a neighborhood where pizza parlors start coming in and I'll show you one where real estate values go down the drain."

He finished with the mail and went to his newspapers. A little while later, as he was finishing his second cup of decaf, he scowled again.

"I'll say one thing. That's a weird attention getter. They followed through."

"What do you mean?"

"Here in the Business Opportunities. An ad. It says:

Leave $10,000 in the trash basket in front of the Horn & Hardart in Times Square and receive something of value in return."

"Odd," Amy replied. "Very odd. But what makes you think it's a follow-up on the attention getter?"

"Because the ad is addressed to me. Walter Fitzgerald."

"That is strange. It looks as though you've been selected."

"Selected for what?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's just a clever new way of selling. Maybe if you leave the money they send you a franchise for something. Maybe a pizza parlor."

"Will you stop thinking about pizza parlors? Especially at breakfast."

"Of course, it may not be just for you. Maybe every Walter Fitzgerald in town got one."

"How many are there, do you suppose?"

"I haven't the least idea. We could look in the telephone book."

"Too much trouble."

"Are you going to leave the money?"

Walt stopped chewing bacon to look at his wife as though she'd suddenly sprouted a dahlia plant out of her hair-do.

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"But I've heard fortunes have been made with crazy ideas. Like the Ford car."

"And what was crazy about the Ford car?"

"Well, the way I heard it, Henry Ford wanted to invent his automobile but he didn't have any money so he went door-to-door asking people for some. The people who gave it to him made big fortunes but the idea of

the Model-T in those days was pretty crazy, wasn't it?"

"I never heard that story but maybe it's true. Ford might have gone door-to-door but he was selling stock. He didn't tell them to throw their money in a trash basket."

"But I'll bet a lot of their friends thought they might just as well have."

Walt grunted. "You just don't understand business," he said as he rose from the table. "I've got to go." At the door, he turned. "If Bridget calls, tell her to ring me at the office."

"Is it important?"

"Sure it's important. A father likes to say hello to his daughter once in awhile, doesn't he? Not just on Christmas and New Year's."

"Maybe this year," Amy said sadly, "it will be Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah . . ."

So that was the end, at least temporarily, of the attempt to aprise the Fitzgeralds of their daughter's desperate plight.

Walt did go—just out of curiosity—to Times Square that day on the way home from Wall Street. He went in and had a cup of coffee and then on the way out he swiftly checked the trash basket at the curb to see if any other Walter Fitzgeralds had fallen for the grift.

There was no indication that they had, but his action added to the adverse opinion of New York City that was becoming prevalent throughout the country. This when a tourist from Des Moines, Iowa said to his wife, "Look at that. Here in Manhattan even the best dressed

people have to scrounge for food."

His wife sniffed in return. "He probably spent all his relief check on clothes and now he's suffering the consequences . . .

Meanwhile, back at the deli—

"Sam," Sophie said, "put in an order for some more of that Olde New England Grape Jam—the brand they import from Tel-Aviv."

"You use it in the Mail Bag Special, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"But I thought we dropped that item from the menu when the mail carriers didn't get their raise."

"That's right—we did. But a funny-looking kid keeps coming in and buying them."

"That kid that always has a nylon stocking around his neck like a scarf?"

"That's him."

"He must be kinky."

"Isn't everybody?" Sophie sighed. "Our children included."

"Why do you say that?"

"If they're normal, why aren't they home like other people?"

Uncle Moe spoke up from where he sat dicing pickles for Sophie's homemade Tennessee relish. "Bernie's hiding out somewhere writing a play."

"I thought he drove a cab," Sam said.

"What a father!" Sophie chided. "To know so little about your own son yet!"

Sam had always hoped to see Steinberg & Son across

the front of the deli and he brooded about it at times. This made for a temporary hostility.

"He got married or something, didn't he?"

"Sam!"

Uncle Moe frowned at his pickle. "I wonder what ever happened to his wife?"

Sophie reacted seriously to this. "I think maybe they had a fight, but it shouldn't last so long."

"It's been—let's see, four days since I've seen Bridget."

Sophie sighed. "I have to keep remembering they're grownup adults. Otherwise I'd be spanking them all the time."

"She's probably gone home to mother. And after a look at that house Walt Fitzgerald lives in, I don't blame her."

"I called Amy. They haven't seen Bridget either."

It was a slow time—mid-afternoon—and the conversation was interrupted when Otis strolled in. He was pensive.

"Have you heard from either of them?" he asked.

"Hello, Otis," Sophie greeted. "Bernie called yesterday afternoon."

"Where is he?"

"He wouldn't tell me," Uncle Moe cut in. "He said he was going great and didn't want people pounding on his door."

"Wasn't he worried about Bridget being gone?"

"It was funny about that. I told him and he said it was all right. He said Bridget went to join the Black-and-Tans."

"But that's over in Ireland," Otis frowned. "And it was quite a while ago."

"I think he got his play mixed up with his personal life. It's what his play's about. The Irish in Ireland."

"He's nuts! What does he know about Ireland? He's never been there. He's not Irish."

Uncle Moe shrugged and ate what was left of the last pickle he was dicing. "So? Carlyle wasn't a Roman, either, but he wrote about the rise and fall."

Another interruption took Sophie back to the sandwich board. Otis looked at the customer. He rubbed his chin and then looked again.

A funny-looking kid. He had a doleful expression and wore a nylon stocking around his neck. Otis kept on watching while the kid ordered a Mail Bag Special and Sophie explained that she was sorry but she was out of grape jam. The kid thought that over and asked if she couldn't use black raspberry. Sophie said, yes, she could, but it wouldn't be a genuine Mail Bag Special. The kid said it would have to do.

There was something familiar about that face and Otis kept wracking his brain to try to remember where he'd seen it before. He felt that he should be able to recall because it was such an odd face. A sad, discouraged mouth; eyes that seemed ready to burst into tears at any moment; a discouraged nose.

It wouldn't come, though, and Otis continued to study the kid. A follower definitely. Not a leader. Otis, who prided himself for remembering faces, was annoyed with himself.

He watched as Sophie finished and the kid walked

out with the foot-long sandwich tucked under his arm. Outside, the kid turned south and Otis stood there, torn between his nagging curiosity and the fact that he'd parked in front of a fire plug on a gamble while he went inside to ask about the current state of affairs.

His curiosity won, a bad decision, he admitted, but he'd made others before and would probably make more before he went to that equal opportunity paradise in the sky.

So he followed.

The kid walked three blocks south and then turned left to go east. The neighborhood was spotty in that section. Poor man, rich man; one street filled with town houses and the next lined with tenements too decrepit to be turned into town houses at the present costs of reconstruction.

The kid reached Third Avenue and went two more blocks south after which he went over to First Avenue and turned back north.

That seemed peculiar to Otis. Of course he had no way of knowing the instructions which had dinned into the kid's saucer-like ears: to always beat a bewildering path when out of the hideout in case someone put a tail on him.

He finally arrived at his destination. This turned out to be a huge building, apparently abandoned, gray from age and fatigue. Barely discernable lettering across the top said it had once been a storage warehouse, but not lately.

Otis saw the kid turn in and enter through an alley door. After a reasonable time, he opened the door and

followed and almost fell over the kid who had been delayed by difficulty in getting the nylon stocking back over his face.

Otis still couldn't remember where he'd seen the kid before . . .

SEVEN

Otis came to under what he was forced to term very peculiar circumstances. His first conscious movement was to raise one hand and rub his jaw. His first words were muttered in a whisper:

"That kid's deceptive. He looks harmless but he's got a right like a pile driver."

Then Otis got up from the floor and took a step and fell flat on his face.

Only then did he realize that he was chained to the legs of an iron cot by one ankle. And only then did he see other sensational aspects of his situation. He was in a vast, empty loft. It was high up. He knew that because all he could see out the window was blue sky turned partially gray by Manhattan smog.

But these things were noted only in passing. The weirdest aspect was Bridget Steinberg. She sat cross-legged on the iron cot—her legs folded together actually—in a position Otis vaguely saw as yogic. Her fingers were interlaced in her lap with the thumbs pointed rigidly upward. He didn't know it, but this was

to form a correct path for the flow of vital energy, the existence of which the yogic faithful firmly believe in, but have never been able to prove to the skeptic.

Bridget's face was pleasantly blank except for the faint, Mona Lisa smile on her lips. Her eyes were closed and the only sign of consciousness was an occasional twitching of her nose.

"You awake?" Otis asked.

There was no reaction. Otis sat down and examined the bracelet around his right ankle. It was of steel but had been thoughtfully wrapped with enough nylon from stocking to form a padding.

"How's the food around here?" Otis asked.

"Not bad. Not bad at all," Bridget replied. "You can order anything you want."

Then her eyes opened and she registered a marked annoyance.

"Now you've broken my meditation!"

"Is that what you came here for? To park on a bed and meditate?"

"Of course not. I was kidnapped. But I have all this time to myself so I thought I might as well use it profitably. I've been a student of yoga off and on for a long time."

"Mostly off, I'll bet. I never heard you mention it before."

"That's because I keep my affairs to myself. I talk very little. Why were you kidnapped?"

"The same reason you were, I guess."

Bridget shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm here because my father is loaded. I heard one of my kidnap-

pers mention that while I was being taken. He said, 'Easy with her. Her old man is loaded and he'll want her back in good shape.' But your family isn't wealthy is it, Otis?"

"Not quite in your old man's class. But how did they kidnap you? The last I saw of you, you were supposed to wait for me."

"I didn't want to involve you so I went to the Village alone. And you know something? Clay Grant wasn't there. He'd moved out."

"Fancy that."

"Anyhow, as I was leaving his empty apartment somebody in the hallway slipped up behind me and put a handkerchief over my nose. It smelled awful. That was the last I remembered until I woke up on the cot."

"How much are they asking?"

"I haven't the least idea. Nobody tells me anything. Cliff is the only one I've seen and he's always wearing his stocking—"

"I've seen him before."

"You followed him here?"

"Uh-huh. From your folks' place. He looked familiar. But I can't remember where it was I saw him."

"He's unhappy but he's very loyal. He does his job."

"You've been here almost four days." Otis said.

"Good grief! Has it been that long?"

"Do you mean you haven't been counting the hours?"

"I started to and then I lost count. After that I lost count of the dawns and dusks. So I'm not sure."

"You been catching up on your meditation then?"

"If my nose doesn't itch or I don't go to sleep. Bernie must be going crazy wondering where I am. I wonder why Daddy doesn't pay the money so I can go home."

"Maybe they haven't asked him yet."

"That's ridiculous! Why would they wait?"

"I don't know but, honey, I get the feeling from what I saw around the deli that they don't know you're gone yet."

"After four days? That's crazy!"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?"

"Bernie must be out of his mind with worry."

"I don't believe it's quite like that. Bernie's off somewhere by himself writing a play, you know."

"Yes, but he was going to call me—keep in touch."

"So you weren't home. If he called and you weren't in, his first thought wouldn't necessarily have been: 'Good gracious! She's been snatched.' "

"No, I suppose not. But how long does it take a person to write a play?"

"I don't know for sure, but I bet Arthur Miller kept at it for at least a week when he wrote *Death of a Salesman.*"

"Hmmm. That means Bernie will be at it three more days."

"Maybe a mite longer, sweetie. This is his first one, you know."

"All right, so Bernie is preoccupied, but there's my mother and father."

"How often do you get in touch with them?"

"Well—pretty often. But with so much to do now—

being married and everything, maybe not as often—"

"So why should they climb the wall when the phone doesn't ring every ten minutes?"

"All right! What about Sam and Sophie and Uncle Moe? Don't they care enough about their daughter-in-law to go upstairs and see if she's still alive?"

"Maybe they think you're staying with your folks. All I know is that things are normal at the deli. No one's upset about anything."

"A fine way to treat a daughter, or a daughter-in-law—or even a wife," Bridget complained.

Otis was tired of the subject. "How do we go to the john around here?"

"Under supervision. Cliff isn't a bad boy, really."

"Not as kidnappers go, you mean?"

"I don't think he's really a part of it."

"What did they do—hire a catering service to take care of the food problem?"

"I mean, he's not the type. I think he's just putty in someone's hands."

Otis rubbed his chin again. "Not in mine. The kid ought to try for the Olympics."

"The most annoying thing is lack of communication. It would help a little if I knew what was going on. Then there's school."

"What do you mean, school?"

"We're coming toward the end of summer. What if I don't get out in time to report for classes?"

"What about our cab? Back in the car pound by this time. When do we eat? I'm hungry . . ."

Uncle Moe, though few realized it, was keenly observant. He'd read Sherlock Holmes and Philo Vance and all the great detectives in his younger years, and had developed a knack of analyzing clues in the same deft manner he now muddled his way through the brilliance of Fischer's chess board strategems.

He hadn't accepted the situation relative to Bridget and Bernie, not completely, and from time to time, he was nagged by the idea that something was wrong.

And now, with enough onions peeled to last a week, he was pondering the situation. He'd seen the funny-looking kid with the nylon scarf come in several times, always to leave with a Mail Bag Special under his arm. This intrigued him some. The kid didn't look like a mailman. He looked like a fugitive from the wretched refuse of someone's teeming shores, that being a partial and slightly inaccurate quote from the legend on the Statue of Liberty—one Uncle Moe respected even though he couldn't see quite what America would want with such people.

As he pondered the situation, the door opened and the kid came in. Of course Uncle Moe didn't in any way associate the kid with Bridget's disappearance. Even Charlie Chan wouldn't have been able to do that with nothing to go on.

But then the kid did something that stirred Uncle Moe's little gray cells. He doubled his order. He got his usual Mail Bag Special, and then ordered a Soul Brother.

Vaguely, Uncle Moe remembered that Otis ate those monstrosities as though they'd be outlawed at any mo-

ment. This tied in with the fact that he hadn't seen Otis around lately, not since the cop came in to ask about the cab they'd finally hauled away at the back end of a tow truck.

This still didn't add up to proof, or even suspicion, of a felony. But it did stir Uncle Moe's curiosity to a point of wondering where those two sandwiches, one under each of the kid's skinny arms, were going.

So he followed the kid as—unknown to Uncle Moe—Otis had followed him before.

The only difference in the trip was that Uncle Moe got temporarily sidetracked. As he came in sight of the big abandoned warehouse and saw the kid disappear inside, he got interested in the big crane that was just pulling into the vacant lot beside the wall of the building.

Machinery had always fascinated Uncle Moe. He was never able to pass up a chance to examine the steel behemoths that were used in the unending construction of Manhattan's big buildings.

So he veered over and looked up into the cab of the crane where the operator was now delicately swinging a cable, like a fish line, trying to hook it onto a huge iron ball that had been delivered earlier.

"What's up?" Uncle Moe asked. "Another skyscraper?"

"Nope."

"Parking lot?"

"Nope."

"Gas station?"

"Nope."

The operator connected the hook on his cable with the ring on the iron ball. This put him in a fine mood. He said, "Gonna knock that eyesore down."

"Hmmm. That'll be some job."

"Nothin' to it. A couple o' whacks and boom! Down it'll come."

"Great, but wait 'til I get out of the way."

"Not now. Couple o' days. Maybe a week."

"All the same," Uncle Moe said, "I better go in and warn them."

"Nobody in there. It's been abandoned for years."

"Yes there is. A funny kid with an appetite like a horse."

So Uncle Moe headed for the door through which the funny-looking kid had gained entrance . . .

That morning, there were two interlocking incidents of note. Bernie, having hit a rough spot in his second act, took time out to call home. He got his mother on the phone and was told that Bridget hadn't been around lately.

This made Bernie feel bad, although it didn't alarm him greatly. The poor kid had gotten lonesome and gone home to her folks. He went back to his typewriter, but when the kink still wouldn't straighten out he began thinking about Bridget again. A sense of guilt followed, whereupon he decided to take a break and straighten out his marital situation.

So he left his hotel, and as long as the Fitzgerald pad was on the way, he stopped and rang the bell. Bridget would probably be there anyhow . . .

A little while earlier, Walt Fitzgerald had just sat down to breakfast. Amy entered with a towel around her. She was also carrying a telephone.

"Darling!" she chided. "Why don't you answer the phone?"

"I didn't hear it."

"Good heavens! It rings all over the house. We have nine extensions."

The one she carried was from the alcove just outside the dining room. It had a fifty-foot cord so it could be carried even into the den beyond.

"Who's it for?" Walt asked.

"It's for *you*. Why do you think I came clear downstairs?"

Amy padded back to her shower and Walt picked up the phone. It was a deep but fairly pleasant voice.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, we don't seem to communicate very well."

"Who's this?"

"A well-meaning friend. Well, at least not an enemy. You didn't accept my invitation to leave the ten grand and get something of value."

"Of course not. What do you think I am—an idiot?"

"But the thing of value, Mr. Fitzgerald, is your daughter Bridget."

Walt dropped his orange spoon. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

"You'd hardly expect us to advertise a kidnapping in the *New York Times*, would you?"

"But it wasn't in the *Times*. It was in the *Wall Street Journal*!"

"The same principle holds, Mr. Fitzgerald."

"But why all the crazy—?" Walt couldn't find the words on such short notice. He pawed blindly for his orange spoon and waved it in the air.

"The crazy *what*, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

"Never mind. Where is Bridget? What have you done with her?"

"She's safe and unharmed. And now if you'll just obey those instructions, Mr. Fitzgerald, Bridget will be returned unharmed and with our thanks. You will, won't you?"

"Of course I will. Do you think I'd let anything happen to Bridget for a measly ten thousand?"

"We aren't greedy, Mr. Fitzgerald. We've made the amount small enough so that you won't have to bother going to the police. We felt that a man of your means would rather pay that small amount than go through all the red tape and blundering that a call to the police invariably engenders."

"You've got a point maybe, but—"

"Then you will leave the money?"

"Of course I will. I've got to go now. There's somebody at the door . . ."

Ten minutes later, Bernie was saying, "Ten thousand bucks. It doesn't seem like much from a guy with your—"

Walt scowled. "It may seem a little heartless at a

time like this, but I can't help resenting that. How come when a guy's got a few bucks laid away, everybody thinks of him in terms of millions?"

"Well, not millions, maybe, but at least a couple of hundred thou."

"Anyhow, the man explained that. He doesn't want any trouble . . ."

That had been Bernie at the door and Walt had brought him to the dining room and offered him some breakfast and he'd refused, saying he wasn't hungry, he just wanted to talk to his wife.

Walt immediately made the necessary explanations, and Bernie's remarks about the piddling little ransom had probably been the result of shock; the words coming out unconsciously while he strove to get his mind wrapped around the enormity of what had happened.

"I don't think we'd better tell anybody," Walt said.

"You mean the cops."

"I mean anybody. Amy would be getting in touch with the National Guard. And your folks. Who would they call—the Jewish Defense League?"

"I don't think so. Besides, the JDL wouldn't do anything. Bridget's not Jewish."

"I was speaking in generalities," Walt said. "Why does everybody always have to be specific?"

"Sorry—have you got the ten thousand? It just happens I'm a little short myself—"

"I'll get it from the safe."

"I'll take it down to Times Square if you want me to."

"No, I think I'd better follow through."

"Please. I feel so useless. I'd like to be doing something. It's all my fault, kind of."

"Why is it your fault?"

"I've been away writing a play. If I'd stuck around—"

"That's all milk under the bridge," Walt said. "Wait here. I'll get the money . . ."

A few minutes later, Bernie took the briefcase Walt handed him and listened to the instructions.

"It said in the *Wall Street Journal* to—"

"The *Wall Street Journal*! What have they got to do with it?"

"That's where it was after an underling goofed and didn't get it into the *Times*."

Bernie looked a trifle confused. "Now wait a minute. You lost me somewhere along the line."

"Never mind that. I didn't have time to go into detail. There'll be plenty of time for that later."

So Bernie got his orders and headed for Times Square . . .

EIGHT

Meanwhile, back at the warehouse—

Uncle Moe looked ruefully at the ankle bracelet holding him to the upper left leg of the iron cot and said, "That kid can fool you. He looks like a slight breeze would blow him over, but he's made of steel pipes. What's the story behind all this?"

Bridget and Otis shrugged in unison. "We haven't been briefed lately," Otis said.

"All I know is that if any more people show up we'll have to get in line to use the bathroom."

Cliff was in the far corner of the loft squatting with his walkie-talkie. He looked depressed.

Uncle Moe asked, "Who's he connected with on that thing?"

"The guy running the show, I guess," Otis replied. "I wonder what my mother did when she got the ransom note."

"I don't think anyone would be silly enough to figure you're worth a dime—or me either. After all, we weren't kidnapped. We just blundered in."

"Uh-huh," Otis mourned, "and when you blunder in on Cliffy you'd better cancel all appointments."

Bridget was looking yearningly at the window. "How are things out there?" she asked. "This is my fifth day. I'm beginning to feel like the Prisoner of Chillon."

Uncle Moe had fallen silent. He'd decided not to say anything about the catastrophe to come. But now he thought it over and decided he had no right to withhold the information. After all, they were in this predicament together.

So he told them. The building was coming down.

Otis and Bridget thought it over in their own secret hearts. It was Otis who spoke first.

"We got our pad knocked down twice in my childhood. To make way for progress. But both times they were thoughtful enough to serve us with eviction notices. This is the first time in my experience that they're not going to bother with the formalities."

"Poor Cliff," Bridget murmured.

"Poor Cliff!" Uncle Moe exclaimed. "Are you out of your skull? How about poor *us*?"

"You don't understand. You can tell just by looking at him that Cliff believes in what he's doing. He's dedicated to a cause even though he's been badly misled. So he's going to die in the line of duty. A martyr so to speak. We're just—well, we're just here."

Otis looked at Uncle Moe. "How can you beat logic like that?"

"There's something you can always fall back on when your mind begins to boggle."

"What's that?"

"The mixed-up state of the world. Even the ones with brains are brainless these days."

"Not to change the subject, but what are we going to do? We can't just sit here."

"You can stand up a while if your legs are cramped. But that's about all."

"But shouldn't we tell Cliff about what's going to happen?"

"No," Uncle Moe growled. "He'll know when the roof falls in. Let's surprise him."

"I think we ought to tell him," Bridget said.

"That's two against one," Otis reminded Uncle Moe.

"So? Who declared a democracy? I didn't. I've always figured a benign monarchy was the best form of government."

"Sure, but what happens when the king dies? His son always turns out to be a stinker."

Bridget said, "Anybody who ever studied history knows we have the best form of government the world has ever known."

"That depends on who wrote the history book," Otis replied. "There are two sides to every question."

"Uh-huh," Uncle Moe cut in. "Your side and the wrong one." He lifted his voice. "Hey junior! How about a trip to the john?"

Cliff signed off on his walkie-talkie and came over to get Uncle Moe. He was a considerate lad. He carried Uncle Moe's chain so it wouldn't drag on the floor behind him . . .

When he got back he waited until Cliff went out of

earshot before saying, "I've got an idea. You say you can get that kid to do anything you ask?"

"Up to a point. He won't tell me who's behind all this. And he won't let us go."

"Okay. This is what we'll do . . ."

About that same time, give or take a few minutes, Bernie was dropping the ransom money into the trash basket in front of the Horn & Hardart on Times Square.

He was tempted to fade back into a doorway to see who came to get it but the idea seemed too dangerous. He'd no doubt been under surveillance ever since leaving the plush Fitzgerald pad on upper Fifth Avenue. That meant eyes were still upon him.

So he began walking north. He cut over to Fifth Avenue along Central Park South and then turned left on the last lap.

Walt Fitzgerald, who'd taken the day off, was waiting for him.

"How did it go?" Walt asked.

"Fine, I guess. I did what you told me."

"Then all we have to do is wait."

"How long?"

"How do I know? Let's go into the den. We might as well be comfortable."

- "You think they'll do what they agreed? Send Bridget back?"

"I'm sure they'll do that or tell us where to find her."

"I wish I had your confidence. Maybe we should have called in the FBI."

"I consider myself a fairly good judge of character, and the voice on the phone sounded sincere to me."

Bernie could only accept that, but he wasn't fooled. He knew Walter Fitzgerald was as worried as he himself. Walt was keeping up a front and you had to admire him for that.

"I hear you're writing a play," Walt said.

"Who told you?"

"You did—when you got here this morning?"

"That's right. I forgot."

"What's it about?"

"The Irish."

"Well, that's fine. We need a good play about the Irish."

"I hoped you'd see it that way."

"You did? Why?"

"I figured you might be my angel when I get it written."

"Angel? That means the sucker who puts up the money?"

"The investor," Bernie corrected. "There are fortunes made in backing plays. Take *Fiddler on the Roof*."

"That's a Jewish play."

"Then take *Tobacco Road*. That was pure grassroots American."

Before Walt could reply, the doorbell rang. The two men looked at each other. Walt got to his feet, but slowly.

"I'll go," he said.

"We'll both go."

They got to the front door and opened it and saw a bright-eyed young man smiling at them.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is William Green. I'm from Lupus Heights, Kentucky."

Neither Walt nor Bernie could think of a quick reply, but Walt finally came up with a delayed one.

"Welcome to Manhattan."

"I'm one of Jehovah's Witnesses. I'm in town for the big rally at Yankee Stadium. Of course we couldn't get the stadium this year, so we're having it at the Aqueduct race track."

Walt and Bernie stared at each other. Could it be possible that such a highly respected organization as the Witnesses was trying to pick up ten grand the hard way?

"Congratulations," Bernie mumbled.

The young man now held forth an expensive genuine cow-hide briefcase. They both recognized it. The case was the one Bernie had used to carry the money.

"I was having a glass of milk in the Horn & Hardart restaurant downtown when I saw you accidently drop this into a trash basket. I realized of course that you were no doubt pressed by the personal problems we all have in these hectic times and thus didn't realize what you were doing. So I retrieved the briefcase and followed you." The boy's bright smile deepened. "It was quite a walk."

Bernie took the case numbly. Walt fumbled at his pocket.

"Thank you, son. Here, let me give you a slight reward for your trouble."

"Oh, no. Definitely not. The satisfaction of a good deed is it's own reward."

"You're a Boy Scout, too, I'll bet," Walt said for lack of something more brilliant.

"Yes. And a good American, I hope."

"Well," Bernie said, "good luck at the race track."

Then William Green of Lupus Heights, Kentucky, was briskly off down the street and Walt and Bernie went inside.

"You numbskull!" Walt barked. "You were supposed to take the money out of the briefcase. It's wrapped in old newspapers."

"How could I do that?"

"By the simple process of—"

Walt strove to demonstrate and came a cropper. The loop on the briefcase wouldn't budge.

"It's locked," Bernie said. "You locked it and forgot to give me the key."

Walt threw the briefcase on the table in disgust. "Well, I guess we all make mistakes. I just didn't want you walking around town with ten grand in an unlocked briefcase."

Bernie did not push his advantage by pointing out the real numbskull. He was too worried about Bridget.

"The thing is," he replied, "what are we going to do now? And what will the kidnapper do?"

"Maybe he'll phone again. Then we can explain."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll have to go to the police. Let's give him two hours. He must be hovering close to that garbage basket. Maybe he'll get impatient."

"All right. But it's going to seem like two years."

"Not if we occupy our minds. How's your gin rummy game . . . ?"

They were lucky. At least Bernie was lucky. The phone rang an hour later—just when Walt suggested raising the stakes to a quarter of a cent a point with Bernie already out fifteen dollars at the tenth of a cent.

Walt answered and the man at the other end was understandably short tempered. "All right," he snapped, "what's your problem?"

"I'm glad you called," Walt replied. "We had a little slip-up. Actually, it was your fault. You were slow on the uptake, so a Jehovah's Witness from Lupus Heights, Kentucky, beat you to it."

"A what from where?"

"A nice lad who happened to be honest. He brought the money back."

The man at the other end muttered, "Incredible. Absolutely incredible," and couldn't seem to think of anything more to say.

"I'm sorry," Walt assured him. "What do you want us to do now?"

"I do have a suggestion. Why don't you take the money back to Times Square and put it where it belongs?"

"You mean in the trash basket."

"Yes, my dear chap. In the trash basket. Put it in a plain brown wrapper. And hurry. Let's get this show on the road. I have a plane to catch . . ."

At approximately the same time, a young man made his way through the thick pedestrian traffic on Lexington Avenue and entered the Steinberg Delicatessen after trying the door to the second floor and finding it locked. He was a nice enough looking young man but he wore a forlorn expression which interested Sophie. A cheerful person herself, she did not like to see people going around wearing forlorn expressions. So, as business was suffering a lull at the moment, she made the young man her temporary project.

"How about a nice Bright Side Special, dear?" she asked. "We put in lots of tomatoes and some hot sauce to—"

"Please. I'm not hungry. I'm looking for Jane Smith."

"Jane Smith? I don't believe I know a girl by that name, dear."

"You must. She lives upstairs."

"Oh, you mean J. R. Smith. I'm sorry, but she moved."

"Moved!" This was obviously pure tragedy. If the young man's expression had been forlorn it was now a pathetic mess.

"She didn't leave a forwarding address, either."

"But we were going to get married!"

"She left a couple of months ago. How come you waited so long to inquire?"

"Pride," the young man said. "We had a fight and we were both proud and—well, communication kind of broke down."

"I'm terribly sorry. Maybe if you ate a little yogurt it would help to tide you over the shock—"

The young man shook his head. "I have no appetite."

"That's easy to understand, dear. I'm sure you'll find her."

"Maybe you've seen a pigeon with a brown wing."

"A pigeon? I don't understand."

"We were both pigeon fanciers. That was how we communicated. We found it more reliable than depending on the phone company. You see pigeons always go right back home when you turn them loose and Jane had some and I had some and she kept mine and I kept hers so that when we wanted to send a message our pigeons always went home with them. Do you understand?"

Sophie was frowning slightly. "So that was it," she murmured. "That was why we found so much—oh, well, it's all cleaned up now. You were saying, dear—?"

"A pigeon with a brown wing. It was one of hers and I finally broke down, swallowed my pride, you know, and sent her a message asking her to call."

"Your name isn't Oliver, is it?"

"Oliver? No. It's Frank. Frank Lewis."

"I just wondered. You were saying—?"

"I sent her a message and I'm sure she would have answered because I'm sure she wanted to patch up our

quarrel as much as I did. But now you say she moved two months ago and I just wondered what happened to her pigeon."

"I'm sure I don't know. You can talk to my daughter-in-law when she comes back. I think she and my son had a fight and she's not here just now. I think she went home to her folks. Anyhow, I'm sure she isn't keeping any pigeons upstairs."

The conversation might have gone on indefinitely because Sophie liked people and enjoyed helping them, but at that moment, the funny-looking kid showed up. There was a little improvement in him because he wasn't wearing the nylon stocking anymore. Thus, the vague look was no longer there. This, Sophie thought, improved his general image.

But of even more interest was the fact that this was his second visit of the afternoon, which meant the Steinberg specials were going over famously somewhere . . .

To explain why Cliff was making that second trip of the afternoon, it is necessary to go back to his first trip; to when he'd returned to the warehouse with his arms full of the prisoners' afternoon snacks.

Things were rather hectic for Cliff. He'd just delivered the food to the iron cot when his walkie-talkie bleeped at him and he went to see about it, thus giving Uncle Moe an opportunity for a final briefing.

He had his note ready and thrust it into one of the specials, neatly replacing the brown paper wrapper so no one would notice.

"All right," he whispered to Bridget. "You know what to do."

Bridget immediately set up a howl which Cliff dutifully answered after he'd finished hearing from his boss.

Bridget said, "I ordered Rock and Roll and you brought me a Mail Bag."

"That's not true. I mean you always order a Mail Bag."

"I usually do but not always. And this time I distinctly told you a Rock and Roll."

"Well that's tough," Cliff replied. "Eat what you've got. Besides, you did order a Mail Bag. I never even heard of a Rock and Roll."

Bridget threw up her hands in indignation. "You're losing your gears. Now I ask you—I ask everybody—didn't I order a Rock and Roll?"

Otis and Uncle Moe nodded solemnly.

"Well, I made a mistake."

Cliff, for all his loyalty and patience, was getting a little fed up. During his leisure moments—and there weren't very many of them what with feeding this voracious trio and leading them one by one to the bathroom—he was beginning to doubt the merit of this project. Vacation was fast ending and he had to get back to school. Patient and long-suffering as he was, even Cliff could come to the realization that he was being imposed upon.

"Eat it and shut up," he said.

"Now just a minute," Bridget countered. "You'll remember what the Voice said. I was to be made com-

fortable. All my reasonable desires were to be fulfilled. And I ask you—is it reasonable to be forced to eat one kind of a sandwich when I distinctly asked for a different kind?"

Cliff's hesitation looked promising, so Uncle Moe nudged Bridget to lay it on him.

"Maybe," she said ominously, "you'd like to have me give the Voice a bad report card on you when we finally meet."

"I don't think you'll be meeting," Cliff said. "But what the hell! Give me the sandwich. I'll exchange it. I'll be a little longer than usual. I've got to run an errand for—"

They all leaned forward, straining their ears, hoping for a name.

"—the Voice," Cliff finished, and they all sat back.

After he left, Uncle Moe grinned and rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

"It won't be long now."

Otis was doubtful. "I don't think it'll work."

"How can it miss?"

"A lot of ways. Suppose Sophie just sells the sandwich to somebody else without opening it."

"She wouldn't do that. It's against the pure food laws—I think."

"But you're not sure."

"No, but there's something else. Cliff's about the only one who buys Mail Bags. That means it would sit around for quite a while before a bidder would show up."

"That's right," Bridget cut in. "And one thing I

know about Sophie. She's got too much pride to sell stale sandwiches."

Otis sighed. "One thing's for sure. This detour has got to end sometime. It can't go on forever."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Bridget mourned . . .

NINE

So, as things worked out, Sophie traded Cliff a Rock and Roll for a Mail Bag, and the crucial moment of Uncle Moe's ploy came stage center.

Sophie looked at the brown-wrapped sandwich pensively as though wondering what to do with it. Then, as destiny dictated, a man in the uniform of Uncle Sam's postal army arrived to order his favorite special, the Mail Bag.

It seemed a heaven-sent opportunity. Sophie reached for the trade-in.

Then her conscience shouted an objection and she said, "Wait a minute. I don't know where this one has been. I'll make you a new one."

This interested the mailman. While Sophie marshalled the fresh ingredients, he said, "What do you mean, you don't know where it's been?"

"A customer brought it back."

"Why?"

"A mistake. He wanted a Rock and Roll."

"You mean the Mail Bag Specials are slipping?"

"Oh, no, dear. They're as popular as ever."

"I wonder why he brought it back, then?"

"Like I said. He wanted a Rock and Roll."

"Hmmm. Maybe I better take a Rock and Roll too."

"You'd be disappointed."

"You mean it's an inferior sandwich?"

"No way. It's just a matter of individual taste."

The mailman considered that and finally accepted the Mail Bag. But his faith in his gastronomical choice had been shaken. His enjoyment of the sandwich would not be quite as keen as it would have been had the conversation not taken place . . .

A few minutes later, Sophie called, "Sam—come here."

Sam started in her direction. But then he stopped and did a double take out the window and headed for the front door.

At the curb, he confronted Freddy Rensaleer who had just braked his Drink & Dog in front of the deli.

"What are you doing here?" Sam demanded. "Trying to undermine my business again?"

"No, sir," Freddie said politely. "I was invited."

"By some of my ingrate relatives?"

"No, sir. By you yourself."

Sam moved closer to apoplexy. "You sit there telling me I invited you back here to cut my throat? Maybe I said I'd furnish the knife too."

"No, sir. You said to come back when I ran out of mustard. And that's what happened—just down the block. So I remembered what you said and—"

As though in need of a witness, Sam stormed back

into the shop. "You knows who's out there?" he demanded of Sophie. "That young schlemiel! He wants mustard."

"Which schlemiel, dear?"

"The one Bridget was sitting on eating a hot dog."

"Oh, that one."

Sam reached up with both hands to tear his hair. He missed and made clawing motions.

"How do I get rid of such people?"

"I know how you can get rid of this one, dear."

"Tell me!"

"Give him some mustard."

It appeared as though Sam hadn't thought of that solution. He grabbed a jar from the shelf and rushed out.

After seeing Freddy off down the block, time had passed and the note Sophie handed him when he returned was pretty well soaked with raspberry jam.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I found it in the sandwich that funny-looking kid brought back to trade for a Rock and Roll. The one without his nylon."

"We're trading sandwiches now? I thought we sold them."

"Look what is says. *Help.* Then down there, *the abandoned warehouse at.* Can you read the rest?"

"I can't read any of it. I think you're imagining."

"No. That part is clear enough. But the rest is all jelly. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Do? I think we ought to put in an order for more mustard. The jar I gave that pirate was our last one."

"Then why did you give it to him?"

"You told me to."

"I only suggested it as a way to get rid of him. You made your own decision."

Sam stormed into the back, a harassed man nobody understood. Sophie went to work on two Cardinal Cooke Specials for a couple of priests and the note was forgotten . . .

But not at the warehouse. There, the three manacled prisoners waited in high hopes of rescue.

Uncle Moe, possibly in order to keep the collective spirit up, said, "I'll bet the cops get here before the kid gets back."

Otis' spirits were the lowest. "I just hope they *get* here. I don't care in what order."

"School opens soon," Bridget mused.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"That's important. I'm a schoolteacher, remember?"

"I'm a cab driver. That's just as important. But I don't—"

"Quiet," Uncle Moe hissed. "Here they come."

"The cops?"

"Of course."

"How do you know?"

"If it isn't the cops, I'd lose my bet and I'm a poor loser."

"If it is the cops, it isn't a platoon. There's only one soul coming up those stairs. You can tell by the sound."

Bridget was right. A single soul appeared at the loft

door. It was Cliff, looking as put-upon as usual. He advanced on his prisoners and thrust one of his brown packages at Bridget.

"You're late," she said.

"I told you I had to run an errand."

"Well, couldn't you have brought my sandwich and then run your errand? It was your boo-boo in the first place, you remember."

Cliff ground his teeth and threw the other brown package on a nearby ledge.

Otis whispered to Bridget. "I wouldn't ride him so hard if I were you. He's got dynamite in his fist."

"You don't think he'd hit a girl, do you?"

"Maybe not. But he might hit me as a warning to you."

"Maybe you're right," Bridget said. Cliff had returned to his walkie-talkie. Now Bridget called, "Cliff," in a more pleasant voice.

"What do you want now?"

"I just wanted to say that you're a lot better-looking now that you've stopped wearing that stocking over your face."

Cliff *was* glad to get rid of the disguise. He'd dropped it after Otis had tailed him to the hideout. It was no use hiding his features from one prisoner when the other could easily pick him out of a line-up.

"Thanks for the sarcasm," he called back.

"I didn't mean it that way. Honest."

Bridget had been unwrapping her sandwich. She stopped suddenly and stared at what she'd found. Otis and Uncle Moe stared also, Uncle Moe having the

presence of mind to move so that Cliff could not see what they'd found.

"Bread!" Otis breathed reverently.

"Gelt!" Uncle Moe croaked.

"There—why there must be thousands here," Bridget marveled.

"The ransom," Uncle Moe said.

"But why was it sent to us?"

"Maybe we're supposed to negotiate for our release," Otis replied.

"Maybe," Uncle Moe conceded. "But if that's true, they've changed kidnapping MO's since my day."

"There's—there's ten thousand dollars," Bridget whispered.

Uncle Moe, who had proved himself the quickest of the three to react, seized the package and slipped it under the mattress. Then he sat down on one of the two additional pads Cliff had provided when things started getting crowded, and cautioned the others of the trio.

"Relax. Quit looking so uptight. Let me figure this thing out. Somebody made a mistake and we've got to take advantage of it."

Bridget looked across the loft. "I'll bet that's my sandwich over there."

"Of course it is," Otis said. "Cliffy made the mistake. He gave Bridget the wrong package."

"But what was he doing with the money?" Uncle Moe asked.

"Sure, what? And as long as he's got it, or thinks he has, why is he still holding us?"

"There can be only one answer to that. He doesn't

know what's in this package."

"Sure. He said he had to run an errand, remember? That was it. He picked up the ransom."

"But ten thousand dollars for three people really isn't much," Bridget said.

"It's only for you, honey. Uncle Moe and I just stumbled in here."

"I suppose. But it still isn't much. When other people are kidnapped, they ask for hundreds of thousands. How come I'm only worth ten?"

"They probably didn't want to make waves. They figured the police or the FBI would be too busy to pay any attention to a kinky little ten-grand snatch."

"Well, none of that really matters very much anymore. We've got the money. Let's give it to Cliff and get out of here."

Uncle Moe was pondering. "What's the rush? You've got 'til school opens, remember?"

"That's true, but I'd like to go home and take a shower before the bell rings."

"Let me think a few minutes. There's more here than meets the eye." Uncle Moe squatted on the mattress and glowered at the far wall as though trying to see more than was apparent to the naked eye.

"All right," Bridget said. "But can I have my sandwich?"

"No way. If you asked him for it, he'd figure out what happened. Give me a few minutes. Then I'll talk to him . . ."

Walt Fitzgerald waited impatiently at home for news

of what was happening. Any news. His first word on developments came from Bernie. But it came slowly.

Watching out the front window, Walt caught sight of Bernie at the end of the block. Bernie was inching along as though his mind were far away. At intervals he stopped altogether and stood staring at whatever was handy to stare at; a refuse basket, a fire plug, a Pekinese doing its business at the end of a leash held by a lanky maid with all the appearances of a dog hater.

"What's wrong with him?" Walt fumed. "What's he doing? Trying to memorize the block?"

Bernie finally reached the door Walt had already flung open.

"What is it?" Walt demanded. "Bad news?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I'm confused."

"Is that any reason to come up the block like you were going to the chair. What happened?"

"That's the problem. What happened."

"I asked you. Don't stand there asking me back."

"I wasn't asking I was saying. The confusing thing is what happened."

"Would you like me to strangle you?" Walt asked in a hissing voice.

"Well, I'll tell you if you'll only let me. You see, after I dropped the ransom, I—" Bernie paused to stand mute and reflect deep distress. "It's so hard to say."

"What's so hard to say?"

"What I'm thinking. Tell me your honest opinion.

Do you think my family could have kidnapped their own daughter-in-law?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, like I said, after I dropped the ransom, I kind of stuck around—"

"That was stupid. You could have scared them off."

"I didn't. A short time later, a funny-looking kid hove to and began digging in the trash basket. He came up with the ransom package and I thought maybe I'd better tail him. So I did."

"Even more stupid," Walt commented. "They could have spotted you."

"They didn't. The kid didn't anyhow. He went over to Lexington Avenue and then walked north to the deli and went inside."

"What deli?" Walt asked as though he feared the truth.

"*The* deli."

"The one that says Steinberg on the front?"

Bernie was able only to nod. Walt walked slowly across the room and sat down. When he spoke it was in a consciously steadied voice.

"Tell me, Bernie—has your father talked about trouble—financial trouble?"

"No. The place is booming."

"Then he hasn't spoken of any holes in the structure—a hole that ten thousand dollars might fill?"

"I told you. They're making good money."

"There's something you have to watch for in the financial world. When a company looks prosperous—when they keep saying everything's going

straight up on the chart—that's the time to be wary. The worse shape they're in, the more prosperous they've got to look. You see, they have stockholders."

"The Steinberg Delicatessen isn't that way. How far can ten shares of stock fall?"

"Ten shares?"

"That's all there is. Dad owns five and Mom owns the other five except she gave one to me and one to Uncle Moe so that puts Dad in charge. It doesn't mean anything, though, because if Dad wants to do something and Mom says no, it has a way of not getting done."

"They put a lot of money into redoing that apartment for you and Bridget."

"That came from the breakage."

"The breakage? What's that?"

"It was Uncle Moe's idea and that's what he calls it—the breakage like at the race track."

"How does it work?"

"Well, suppose the price of a special is a dollar and a quarter. It's Uncle Moe's theory that if they'll pay a buck and a quarter, they'll pay a buck thirty. So they make the price a buck thirty and Mom keeps putting the extra nickel into the breakage box. That's what they used to redecorate."

"It sounds like an intriguing idea," Walt mused. "If U. S. Steel added a sixty-fourth of a cent a pound and had a breakage account, it would—"

He stopped suddenly, realizing that such reveries were pointless. He brought his hands down slowly and laid them flat on the table.

"It doesn't matter, Bernie."

"It doesn't *matter!* That my parents may be kidnappers? That they'd snatch their only son's wife in order to add a miserable ten thousand dollars to their horde?"

"What I mean is that whoever did snatch Bridget has the ransom money now, so she'll be released. We can figure the rest of it out at our leisure."

"But what will we do if we find that— Oh, hell! I don't believe it!"

"Look, maybe the messenger just went in for a sandwich. Did that occur to you? You claim your folks make the best heroes in town."

"It did occur to me. But how many kidnappers walk in for a snack with their loot under their arm?"

"As I said, we can figure it all out later. You'd better go home now. Bridget may turn up there. I'll stay here and wait for any possible message. Maybe we'll have to go get her."

"Okay," Bernie muttered. "I hope I can go right on looking like a loving son."

"Try," Walt urged. "Try hard . . ."

TEN

"Cliffy boy. I'd like to speak to you."

This was Uncle Moe calling the jailer in lilting, friendly tones.

Cliff wandered over, very little sunshine glowing in his face.

"If somebody wants a banana split or something, the answer is no."

"Nothing like that. It's just that I'd like to negotiate."

"Negotiate for what?"

"Our release. Our freedom."

"The answer is still no."

To the untrained ear, the reply would have been discouraging. But Uncle Moe read it differently. There were undertones of indecision in Cliff's voice. He sounded a little like a person who'd begun to realize he was getting the dirty end of the stick.

"Besides," Cliff went on, "you've got nothing to negotiate with—even if I were willing to negotiate, which I'm not."

"You said something about getting back to school."

"So what?"

"That's important."

"You talk but you don't say anything."

"What I can't understand is how a clean-cut American boy could get mixed up in kidnapping."

"That's a bad word. You shouldn't use it. This isn't kidnapping."

"No?"

"It's peaceful restraint in a justified effort to finance a good cause."

"Wow!" Otis exclaimed. "Who called it that?"

Cliff seemed about to mention a name. Then he said, "Never mind."

"Is his name Oliver?" Bridget asked.

"Never mind. Now all of you just shut up. I'm tired of listening to you."

Cliff started to walk away. Uncle Moe said, "It just so happens that I brought a little money with me."

Cliff stopped.

"And one more thing," Uncle Moe went on. "What's a better cause than your tuition? School expenses are high. According to statistics the two things that have gone up fastest are college costs and hospital expenses."

Cliff turned back.

"What have hospital expenses got to do with it?"

"I just used them as a point of comparison. What do you figure it will cost you to get through another year of college?"

"More than you've got."

"Don't be too sure."

"Well, I've got a partial scholarship. And I can get a job in the cafeteria."

"Say around five hundred dollars?"

"That wouldn't help much. I'd still have to work in the cafeteria and I kind of wanted to try out for the boxing team."

"You'd make it! You'd make it!" Otis said as he automatically rubbed his jaw.

Cliff's eyes turned dreamy. "That way, a guy could keep on going—try out for the Olympics—come away with a gold medal—*be* somebody."

"Can you imagine?" Bridget said. "Then we could all say we'd known a gold medal winner."

"Would you let us go for ten thousand dollars?" Uncle Moe asked.

The dreamy look turned to a glow. "Would I!"

"How about four hundred and fifty?"

"What do you think I am? Corrupt or something?"

"We've already established that. What we're talking about now is price. And we've got a basis for negotiation. Five hundred dollars."

"I told you—"

"I know. I can up that five percent."

"Why five percent?"

"Government guide lines. We don't want to promote inflation. The President has set limits. No increase higher than five percent."

"He evidently doesn't know what an education costs."

"Things were cheaper when he was a lad."

Cliff frowned at the walkie-talkie as though he were blaming it for all his troubles—or at least a greater part of them.

"I don't know—"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Uncle Moe said. "I'll up it another fifty. In fact, I'll make it six hundred. We'll call it a contribution to clean amateur sport and I'll fight it out with the price board later."

Cliff was obviously debating the problem. "His big argument was that the end was worth the means—"

"Clay Grant, you mean?" Bridget asked.

"Clay who?"

"Well, if it wasn't Oliver, I thought maybe—"

"Another twenty-five for bus fare," Uncle Moe said.

"So if that's true—about the means and the end—why shouldn't a good college education be viewed in the same light? Restraint, the means in one case, and lack of restraint, the means in the other?"

"If there's anything I've always admired," Otis said, "it's a mind that can cut through the shell and get to the kernel."

"Logic is one of the things I'm studying," Cliff said. "What happened was that I came to New York for a rock festival and got mixed up with causes. Now I think maybe I'm getting a little tired of causes."

"Ten dollars more for snacks on the way back."

The sunnier part of Cliff's nature suddenly broke through. He smiled. "It's a deal," he said. "And I hope it doesn't make you feel bad when I tell you I'd have settled for the four-fifty if you'd been resolute."

Uncle Moe looked sheepish. "I always had a soft

touch—too generous for my own good. Have you got change for a hundred . . . ?"

"I'm broke. If this thing had gone on any longer, we'd go on a diet around here."

"You've been paying for the snacks yourself?"

"Out of my tuition money."

"Did Oliver ever sell you a bill of goods!" Bridget marveled. "Making you pay for his kidnapping. It was Oliver, wasn't it?" When Cliff didn't answer, she added: "Or Clay Grant?"

Cliff just might have broken down and answered, but Uncle Moe cut in. "Never mind the change. Take an extra fifty for the snacks. But there's one stipulation."

"What's that?"

"You get out of town. Get back to where you came from. You're a nice kid and I don't want you to get into any more trouble."

Cliff took the money. He got a little emotional. He said, "I just want you to know you're about the nicest people—the nicest people—"

"You ever kidnapped?" Otis suggested.

"Or I ever expect to," Cliff said. "Here's the key."

With that, he blew the joint. And just in time, too, because he'd hardly disappeared and Uncle Moe had just unlocked the leg irons when one wall of the warehouse caved in.

"Come on," Otis yelled. "Let's get out of here! A guy could get killed . . . !

Safe in the street, Bridget rubbed her ankle. "It will

be wonderful to get home to a shower. Wait 'til we tell them what happened."

"I could use a drink," Uncle Moe said. "There's a bar down the street there. Let's have a quick one."

"I'm with you," Otis said.

Bridget beamed on Uncle Moe. "It was so courageous of you to save Daddy's money that way. He'll be very grateful to you. He'll probably even give you a reward."

"You're sure it *was* his money then?"

"Of course. Who else has any? I mean—"

"I understand. But that wasn't why I leaned on Cliffy. I need that money."

"You mean you're going to *keep* it?"

At a table in the bar when they were all gripping frosty Tom Collins glasses, Uncle Moe answered.

"Uh-huh. Like I said. I need it. And there's something else. We aren't going to say a thing about this kidnapping. Not for a while."

Otis eyed him suspiciously. "Well now, look! It horrifies me to hear you say things like that. Grabbing the ransom money for yourself. As an honest man, I protest here and now. If we do anything as sneaky as what you suggest, the bread is going to be split three ways."

"You got me wrong. I'm going to use this money as bait."

"A pretty high-priced worm."

"Not if it catches a kidnapper."

"I think you're wasting your time," Bridget said. "He's too smart. I mean—unless we talk to the FBI—"

"No. We button our lips."

"But it's bound to get out."

"Not if we keep our own counsel—clam up."

"But why? We don't have to be ashamed of being kidnapped. It wasn't our fault."

"Look, precious. A crime has been committed. I'm going after the criminal."

"Then I'd think you could use a little help. Like the police."

"They'd only get in the way. All that paperwork. The questions. It would take too much time. So you just go on home and pick up the even tenor of your ways. Slide back into the scene."

"But they'll ask where I've been."

"All right. Lie to them. Tell them you got caught in a traffic jam."

"Do traffic jams last five days?"

"Tell them you visited a friend. A girl friend that is."

"Well—"

"Now scoot along, you two. I'm going to be busy."

"Not me," Otis said. "Whither goest thou I too goest there."

"Okay. But let's move."

Back in the street, Uncle Moe and Otis watched as Bridget turned the far corner heading for home.

"Good kid," Uncle Moe said.

"The best," Otis agreed. "Now what?"

"We've got to get back inside."

"If we've got to go back, why did we leave in the first place?"

"Because they were knocking the place down."

"That's right. As I recall, it was a pretty good

reason. It still is. Let's stay where we are."

"Those clowns have knocked off for the day. I think they were just trying out the ball. They hit the wall once and then left."

"They probably figure the building will fall down by itself."

"Well, let's hope it waits a few minutes. Come on."

The stairway to the loft was solid enough, the only change being the absence of one wall. But Uncle Moe wasn't happy with what he found up there.

"Too late!"

"Too late for what?"

"It's gone!"

"What's gone?"

"The sandwich! He beat us to it. We got one break, though. He was in a hurry to get away with his loot and he left the walkie-talkie."

"I'm catching up with you," Otis said. "Now all we have to do is wait 'til he calls in. Then we ask him for his name, rank, and serial number."

"It might not be that easy."

"You're sharp today. I was just about to suggest the same thing."

Uncle Moe sat down on the cot to ponder. "We can unravel it to some extent. What had to happen was that Cliff picked up the ransom money from somewhere on the big wheel's orders. That was the errand he had to run when Bridget told him to exchange the sandwich. Then the BW came here to pick up the loot."

"And he found an unexpected situation."

"Right. Everybody gone. That must have confused him."

"He found them knocking the building down, too, which must have added to his nervousness. So he grabbed what he thought was the bread, and headed out."

"That certainly follows," Uncle Moe agreed.

"You don't think he checked and found out it was the wrong kind of bread?"

"Did we stop to sign out when the walls started tumbling down?"

"But he will find out."

"Maybe he has already."

"So he knows the caper blew up and he's on the way out of town."

"Maybe, maybe not. Let's find out." Uncle Moe picked up the walkie-talkie and threw the switch.

"Hello—hello—anybody there?"

A few long moments of silence crept by. Then there was an answer. A cautious voice.

"Who are you?"

"A friend of the family. Who's this?"

"Never mind. What are you doing there?"

"Looking for another member of the family. Let's negotiate."

"I don't get it."

"It's simple. I brought the money. Where's the merchandise?"

Otis listened in fascination. He was steeped in admiration for Uncle Moe's quick mind. Obviously Uncle

Moe was leaning heavily on the hope of poor communication between Cliff and his boss. He was also leaning on the hope of strong greed at the other end of the walkie-talkie.

"How did you get there?" the Voice asked. "What the hell's going on?"

"You tell me. All I know is that some character named Cliff called and said I could pick up the merchandise here. So I rush over and find nobody home. What gives?"

Otis tried desperately to follow the thread of perilous logic. The Voice could only figure that Cliff had chickened and run out. It was the crucial point. If he'd believe that, he'd believe the rest.

"I don't believe it," he said.

Uncle Moe wiped some sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, and replied, "Look—we've tried to do the right thing. We've been decent and aboveboard and honest and all we keep getting is the shaft. Now we go to the cops."

"Wait a minute. There's no point in getting all uptight. We can still do business. You still got the money?"

"Sure—but—"

"It was just a quick change of plan. You do exactly as I tell you and everything will be all right."

"I'm not sure, but I'll listen."

"Go straight to Kennedy airport. Put the money in a lock box—no—wait a minute."

Uncle Moe put his hand over the transmitter of the

walkie-talkie and whispered, "He's thinking. It may take a little time."

It took some thirty seconds.

"Stay where you are for one hour," the Voice ordered. "Got that?"

"I've got it."

"Then go to Kennedy airport and pick up an envelope at the TWA check room. There'll be a key in it. A key to a lock box. No—that wouldn't work either."

"Why not?"

"You'd put the money in the lock box. That would be okay, but then you'd have the key so I couldn't get the bread out again."

"I see what you mean."

"Wait a minute," Otis said. "None of that is necessary."

"Who's that?" the Voice demanded. "You got somebody with you?"

"Another member of the family."

"Hold it!" Otis hissed. "One look at me and he'd know you were lying."

"He's not going to see you," Uncle Moe whispered back. "What was your idea?"

"Well, why bother with the key? Why don't we just check the bread at the checkroom and he can pick it up?"

"That wouldn't work," the Voice objected. "I couldn't get the money without the check ticket and you'd have that."

"He's got a point," Uncle Moe said.

"Then why don't we just put the money on a bench somewhere? It's in an old brown wrapper. Nobody'd pay any attention to it."

"No way," the Voice said. "That's how it worked in the loft and all I got was a sandwich."

"Wait a minute," Uncle Moe cut in. "We've all missed the obvious answer. This is how we'll do it. We'll check the money. Then we'll put the check ticket in an envelope and put it in a lock box. Then we'll put the lock box key in another envelope and check that. Okay?"

"Okay—no, wait! How will I get the check ticket for the key so I can get into the lock box to get the check for the money?"

"Hmmm," Uncle Moe pondered. "Looks impossible, doesn't it?"

"Not really," Otis said. "Is he going to fly out?"

"Are you going to fly out?" Uncle Moe asked.

"You better believe it."

"What line?" Otis asked.

"TWA, you dope," the Voice replied. "What do you think we're doing in the TWA terminal in the first place?"

"Then we'll leave the check at the TWA service counter and you can pick it up when you buy your ticket."

"I guess that'll be all right," the Voice replied. "But if we do that, just leave the check receipt for the money and forget about all the lock box business."

"Who is this?"

It was a new voice. A heavy, demanding voice

belonging to none of the three who were conferring—not Uncle Moe, not Otis, not the kidnapper.

"Never mind who we are—who are you?" Uncle Moe demanded.

"This is the New York Police Department. I'm Patrolman Matthew Kowalski and I want to know who's on this wavelength. Who are you and what are you talking about?"

"It's a private conversation," Uncle Moe said, "Signing off."

He dropped the walkie-talkie and said, "Let's get out of here before the cops find us."

"How can they do that?" Otis asked as he followed Uncle Moe down the stairs.

"How do I know? By triangulation or something. But trust them to stick their nose in where they're not wanted . . ."

ELEVEN

Somewhat prior to the time the three prisoners obtained their release, Bernie left the Fitzgerald pad and made his way home to the deli.

Sophie saw him first and said, "Well, it's about time you drifted back into our neighborhood. I think maybe you've lost a wife but that's all right. There are lots of unattached girls around."

"I've been busy," Bernie replied.

"How novel! Being busy is a difficult thing for us to understand around here, seeing as all we do is sit around and twiddle our thumbs."

"Don't ride me, Mom. I've got troubles."

"What with? Your second act?"

"More than that." He paused to look about—at the half-dozen customers waiting for sandwiches, at the general air of bustle about the place.

"You seem to be pretty busy," he said.

"Our joints aren't exactly rusting."

"Making lots of money?"

Sophie didn't answer. An order for three specials got

in the way and Bernie went on back to where Sam was writing out supply orders.

"Hi, Dad."

"Good day, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Dad! It's me—I—Bernie."

Sam looked closer. "Well, so it is! You'll have to pardon me. It's been so long since I've seen you I forgot what you looked like."

"Some joke."

"No joke. How's your divorce going?"

"What divorce?"

"How many wives have you lost lately? Not that I blame Bridget a bit. Any idea who she's married to now?"

"Like I told Mom, Dad. Don't ride me. I've been away trying to write a play."

Sam could show the cynical front just so long when it came to his only son. He smiled and reached into a jar and said "Have a pickle, kid. How's the play going?"

"Okay, I guess."

Bernie munched his pickle and Sam went back to writing his supply orders. After scowling a while, Bernie said, "Dad, have you got any troubles you haven't told me about?"

"What kind of troubles, son?"

"Well, like financial, maybe?"

"Why? Do you need some money?"

"No."

"A new cab? Is the old one wearing out?"

"No, it's fine. I just thought maybe things had gone

bad and you didn't want to tell me."

"That's the silliest thing you ever said. If things go bad around here, you'll know about it. You're a stockholder, aren't you?"

"I'm glad you feel that way."

"How else would I feel? In fact—" Sam looked to see if Sophie's ear was hanging out. Even then, he lowered his voice. "In fact if you want to sell your share of stock—"

"No, Dad. I'll keep it."

"Good thinking. And if I were you, I'd try to talk Uncle Moe into selling you his share."

"Maybe I will. I'm going upstairs now and take a shower. See you . . ."

When Bridget got home, she was struck by the fact of how nice everything looked. That busy block on Lexington Avenue was about the nicest block she'd ever seen. And the store front with Steinberg Delicatessen written across it. That was nice too; so cozy and strong and comforting.

She wanted to go in and tell everybody how much she loved them and how good it was to be back. But she didn't feel up to answering questions with all those lies she'd have to tell, so she went up the front stairs and when she got there, she thought she'd never seen such a nice apartment.

If she'd been listening carefully instead of roaming around in a pleasant reverie, she would no doubt have heard the shower running and then have heard it stop. But she didn't.

So the first inkling that she was not alone was when she heard some squishy footsteps and turned just in time to see a man move across the room in a sort of blur, obviously bent on attacking her.

He must have moved faster than the speed of sound because he was upon her before she heard his cry of joy:

"Bridget! Darling! Where have you been? What have they done to you?"

And when she was in his arms, all resolutions went by the boards. She could no more have lied to him than she could have given a phoney name at her own confirmation.

"I was kidnapped," she wailed. "I was chained to a bed in a dirty loft and all I had to eat was—"

Kisses cut her off. They lasted a while, after which Bernie said, "I know, honey. And I've been going nuts."

"You knew? About the kidnapping?"

"Of course."

"But I thought you were locked up in some hotel—"

"For a while. But I went to your folks' pad. That's where the ransom notes were sent. I've been with your father. We suffered together. Tell me what—"

"I don't want to talk about it! It's all over as far as I'm concerned. I want to forget it. At least until tomorrow or maybe the next day. Now I just want you to tell me you love me and that you won't run away and hide anymore."

Assurances were given. They were not believed. They were given again; and not believed this time only

because Bridget wanted to hear them a third time.

After that there was much more communication of a strictly private nature until Bernie suddenly snapped his fingers. They were dry now, so the snap interrupted whatever Bridget was saying, and Bernie had the floor.

"I've got an idea! A great idea! There's something we overlooked."

"What, darling?"

"Well, we didn't exactly overlook it. We just didn't have time. But now we're going to take time."

"Tell me!"

"Not yet. You just get dressed, sweetheart."

"But you're the one that's not dressed."

"Then lay out some clothes for me while I use the phone . . ."

A short time after Bernie had left the Fitzgerald town house, Amy breezed in from attending to one of the chores wives of prosperous Wall Street men have to attend to. She found her husband pacing the floor.

"Walt, darling," she asked. "Why aren't you at work?"

Walt was in no mood for logical questions. "Can't a man stay home and enjoy his premises once in a while without complaints from the rest of the family?"

"But I wasn't complaining. It's nice to have you home. I just wondered if you were ill or something."

"I haven't been ill since I had the mumps some forty-five years ago."

"Then why don't you sit down and relax? Why keep walking back and forth—"

"I like to walk. I enjoy pacing. Do you mind?"

"That reminds me of something I've been meaning to mention."

"Can't it wait?"

"I suppose it could, but then I might forget it again. It's about the young folks—Bridget and Bernie."

Walt whirled like an old jungle tiger whose pride was suddenly menaced by outsiders. "What about Bernie and Bridget?"

"Nothing so terribly important. But your pacing reminded me of it. You know they go to the park on weekends. So why don't you buy a bicycle and go with them? The exercize would do you good."

Walt muttered his answer as he returned to his pacing. Fortunately, Amy did not demand a clear reply because she remembered something at that moment.

"Oh, good heavens! I forgot all about Beatrice!"

"What *about* Beatrice?"

"She's coming for a visit. I told you that. Why didn't you remind me?"

"You never told me."

"I certainly did."

"The last thing you told me about her was that she was sunning herself in southern France."

"That was a year ago."

With most of his mind otherwise occupied, Walt gave a portion of it to Beatrice. "Where was it you knew that woman? Grammar school? High school?"

"College, dear. And she's so interesting. She leads such an exciting life. All over the world. And always with a different husband." Amy looked at Walt lov-

ingly. "We aren't at all the same in that respect."

"When's she due?"

"Almost immediately," Amy said, glancing at her watch. "I must hurry."

On the way out, she said, "Is there anything you want, dear?"

"Yes. I'd like the telephone to ring."

"I'm sure it will in due time, darling. See you soon."

With that, Amy left Walt to his pacing . . .

After carrying out the plan that had been hatched in the loft, Uncle Moe and Otis found a niche from which they could keep an eye on the TWA service desk.

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Otis said.

"A good idea? How else can we nail the bum except by waiting for him?"

"But how'll we know who he is?"

"He's going to ask for that envelope we addressed to Mr. Jones."

"But we can't hear him from here. How do we know there aren't ten other envelopes waiting for cats to pick them up?"

"We don't," Uncle Moe said patiently. "In fact there's very little we do know. Like whether he'll ever show up. We don't know how the ransom payment was arranged in the first place or where Cliff picked it up or from whom. We don't know but what the kidnapper checked back after he talked to us and found out Bridget is free."

"Who would he check with?"

"How do I know? Maybe whoever he made the deal with in the first place."

"But *they* might not know Bridget is free."

"Why do you suppose I told her to button her lip? Just for that reason."

"This whole thing is pretty iffy, isn't it?"

"I haven't been in an iffier situation since I can remember. What we got to go on is faith and hope."

"And charity if the dude figures out a way to get his hands on that bread."

"Maybe we should—"

"Hold it!"

They both stared at the service desk as though it had suddenly come to life and made a pass at the lovely little attendant with the foot-long eyelashes.

"Do you see what I see?" Uncle Moe asked.

"I think so."

"I was hoping you didn't. Then I could charge it to being uptight. But I guess we see the same thing."

"But what are they doing here?"

"Beats me. Except I never saw Bridget look so happy."

"Bernie too. They're acting like newlyweds."

"Well, aren't they?"

"I don't know. Two months is a long time the way marriages go these days."

They watched as Bernie and Bridget got whatever information they'd gone to the desk for and then turned away.

"They're coming in this direction," Otis said.

"That's good. We won't have to chase them and maybe blow our cover."

As the happy pair hove close, Uncle Moe emitted a sharp hiss—so sharp that Bernie glanced down and side-stepped as though wondering who'd loosed a rattlesnake in the place.

"Over here," Otis whispered harshly.

Frowning in surprise, Bernie steered Bridget at an angle and approached the hisser and the whisperer.

"What are you two doing here?" he demanded.

"What are *you* doing here?" Uncle Moe countered.

"I asked first."

"We're waiting for a friend."

"I'll bet you aren't," Bridget said. "This has got something to do with the kidnapper."

"You told him?" Otis asked.

"Told me," Bernie replied. "I knew about it all the time. I delivered the ransom money."

"Maybe we're talking about two different jobs," Uncle Moe said. "In our snatch, the money was delivered by a funny-looking kid named Cliff."

"I delivered it to him. I mean I put it in the trash basket where he picked it up. Then I followed him."

"You followed him? Then why didn't you come upstairs and rescue us?"

"Up to the apartment? You weren't up there were you?"

"No, you idiot. We were in the loft."

"Well, I trailed the kid to the deli. So I thought you meant the apartment."

"He went to the deli to exchange Bridget's sandwich. It was part of the scheme we dreamed up to escape."

Bernie looked at Bridget. "You didn't tell me any of that."

"I didn't want to talk about it. I still don't."

Uncle Moe said, "None of that explains why you two are here at the airport."

Bernie breathed an inner sigh of relief. He didn't know what was going on, but he'd heard enough to convince him that his parents were not involved in a felony. At the same time, he felt terribly guilty for allowing himself to even suspect them. He kept all this to himself, however.

"We're going on our honeymoon," Bridget dimpled.

"Honeymoon! But you've been married two months."

"And we never had a honeymoon. It was Bernie's idea. Isn't he wonderful?"

"Who's going to drive the cab on the second shift?" Otis demanded.

"By the way, where is the cab?" Bernie asked. "I haven't seen it around lately."

"It's probably in the car pound."

"But I thought you got it out?"

"I did. But they probably put it back."

"Well, let me know how it works out. We're headed for some lovely Caribbean island."

"Not so fast," Uncle Moe said. "We need a little help here. We're trying to put the arm on the cat who kidnapped Bridget."

"Bridget says she doesn't want to talk about it."

"Who's talking? What we want you to do is keep an eye on the checkroom counter around the corner. If anybody picks up a plain brown-wrapped package, grab him by the ankle and yell for us. We're watching the service counter where he's supposed to show up first. But we might miss him because we don't know what he looks like."

"Well, we've got an hour before our plane takes off. I guess we can give you a hand."

"That's real white of you," Otis said.

"Why bring color into it?"

"I mean you're very accommodating, sir. Seeing as it was your wife the dude kidnapped."

"Don't mention it. Glad to help."

Uncle Moe shook his head as Bridget and Bernie went around the corner hand in hand. "When they get romance on their mind they're not good for much else."

"It looks to me like romance caught up with them a little late. What have they been doing the last two months?"

"Beats me."

Uncle Moe suddenly grabbed Otis' arm. He was staring at the service counter.

"Do you see what I see?"

"A broad! She's picking up a white envelope. Our envelope?"

"Who else's? You don't recognize her?"

"Oh, sure. It's Amy what's-her-name. Mrs. Fitzgerald. Bridget's mother."

"And she's coming this way. Right toward the checkroom."

"What for do you think?"

"Are you blind? She's going to pick up the bread. What else?"

"I can't believe it."

"I can't either," Uncle Moe said. "But like Sherlock Holmes told Watson—when you eliminate everything else, what's left has to be the truth."

"That wasn't quite what Sherlock Holmes said."

"It's close enough for me."

With that, Uncle Moe stepped out to intercept Amy Fitzgerald. He was received with a cordial smile.

"Why, Mr. Steinberg! Otis! Imagine meeting you way out here. Are you taking a trip?"

Regretful but firm, Uncle Moe said, "No, Mrs. Fitzgerald. We're here for another reason. If you don't mind, we'll take that check stub."

"Why of course. How thoughtful of you. It's so nice to meet friends in a place where you don't expect to find any."

As the trio approached the check room counter, Uncle Moe glanced at the place Bridget and Bernie had hidden themselves—in full view of anyone passing by. He sighed. Getting help from those two was like asking a blind man to help find a black button lost in a coal mine.

Otis' mind was on other things—sad things—like a millionaire's wife mixed up in a kidnapping. He really couldn't believe that, though.

She was conned into it someway, he told himself.

She was a real nice lady but not overly bright and the kidnapper talked her into helping him. The same way he conned Cliff.

They got to the counter and Uncle Moe handed the clerk the stub. A minute or so later, the clerk returned lugging two huge, purple suitcases. He disappeared again and returned with two more.

Moe stood confused. "What is this?" he asked.

"Why, my friend's luggage," Amy said. "What did you expect?"

"Well, I'm not sure."

"My friend Beatrice Henning—I think."

"You think."

"I'm not sure about her last name. You see, Beatrice marries quite often. But she's a wonderful person. She's visiting me from Southern France and had to hurry away for an appointment so she left a message at the service counter and asked me to pick up her luggage. It was something about an overdue alimony check she had to go see about. Wasn't that it?"

"How would I know?"

"But you must know. Otherwise, why were you waiting to help me with the luggage?"

With Uncle Moe speechless for once in his life, Otis went into the breech. "You see, Mrs. Fitzgerald. We're down here to see a friend off and then we saw you and figured we might help. I guess we're just a couple of Boy Scouts at heart."

"Well, either way, it's sweet of you to help and I appreciate it."

With all those explanations occupying their atten-

tion, Uncle Moe and Otis completely missed a man in dark glasses who approached the counter. He had a cane to help him with a gimpy leg and he presented a stub and received a package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Also at that moment, Amy spied Bernie and Bridget in their hiding place just at the edge of the mainstream of traffic where people kept hitting them as they passed. The man with the cane bumped Bernie and hurried on.

"Bridget, darling!" Amy shrilled. "Bernie, pet!"

They took their eyes off each other long enough to see Amy. Bridget waved. Amy headed in their direction.

Otis and Uncle Moe looked at each other mournfully. Then each of them gripped a suitcase in either hand and followed.

They followed slowly because of the load as Otis muttered, "Beatrice whatzername must be bringing in rocks. Let's switch suitcases."

"No point. My bags are full of anvils."

Slowed down as they were, they reached the reunion in time to hear Amy scream, "A honeymoon! Why I think that's wonderful, dear. Walt and I went on a honeymoon, oh, so long ago. That was before you were born, darling."

Uncle Moe was all business. He asked Bernie, "Did you see anyone suspicious? Or weren't you looking?"

"We were looking, but we didn't see anybody. I didn't anyhow." He turned to Bridget. "Did you see anybody, dearest?"

"Nobody suspicious, darling. Only Ali, that strange character from the UN. He must be flying out. He went by a little while ago."

Otis straightened from his porter chores and banged the heel of his hand against his forehead.

"I remember! I remember!"

"Remember what?" Uncle Moe asked.

"Where I saw Cliff the first time."

"At the UN?"

"No. In front of the Waldorf. That was why he looked familiar when I saw him in the deli and followed him."

"So he was in front of the Waldorf. Would you have followed him if you'd seen him in front of Macy's?"

"No. You see, that was where I picked up the Ali character; at the Waldorf. Cliff was making like a valet—easing the guy out the door—brushing the doorman aside as though he'd contaminate the guy. Then I drove Ali to the UN where I saw Bridget in the protest parade."

"Well, it's a great time to get your memory in gear. With a little effort you could have saved us a lot of trouble. He's obviously our man—the Voice—Mr. Mysterious. Which way did he go, Bridget?"

With her eyes on Bernie and her ears tuned to her mother's wave length, Bridget couldn't give much attention. But she did point to the ramp.

"He went that way. I guess he's boarding his plane."

"Come on," Uncle Moe said. "We've got him."

Uncle Moe rushed off and Otis caught up to say,

"He's tall, over six feet. And he is wearing an African nightgown like a flaming sunrise."

"Then we shouldn't have much trouble spotting him."

"Maybe, but this ramp leads to four take-off doors. How'll we know which one he's after?"

"We play it by ear," Uncle Moe said. "Maybe we'll get a break."

They did. To a certain extent. The four planes were due out very shortly, but none of the passengers had yet boarded. Thus, the two hunters had only to go to each waiting group and look for a flaming nightgown.

There was only one problem. No such wearing apparel was in evidence. There was a wide variety of dress. Some of it sensationally hued. But nothing remotely like the costume purportedly worn by Ali.

After checking, rechecking, and checking again, the pair returned to where Bridget and Bernie and Amy were guarding Beatrice's luggage.

"No luck," Uncle Moe announced. "You made a mistake. He didn't go that way."

"But he did. I saw him."

Uncle Moe snorted. "The way you two were involved with each other, you wouldn't have seen Spiro Agnew if he'd ridden past in his shorts on an elephant."

"I really don't understand," Amy said. "What's this all about?"

"Nothing important. Otis, let's help Mrs. Fitzgerald to a cab. At least we'll have one good deed to chalk up for our day's work."

As they picked up the rocks and the anvils and struggled toward the exit, there were announcements over the loud speaker."

"Flight seven-o-four bound for Paris is now scheduled to take off at three-forty . . . Flight six-nine-seven bound for Oslo is now scheduled to take off at three-fifty-five . . . Flight nine-twenty-one bound for Athenus is now scheduled to take off at three-thirty-five . . . Flight three-nine-six bound for Benglar now scheduled to take off at four-fifteen . . ."

Otis scowled as he struggled with his bags. "Benglar—Benglar—where have I heard that name before?"

"Probably the same place you heard Paris and Oslo and Athens. What difference does it make?" Uncle Moe staggered to the exit door and stepped on the switch. The door opened.

"But Benglar seems to have some special significance."

"No doubt with your brilliant memory, you'll figure it out before the snow flies."

"I think it's important. I really do."

"I'm beginning to think none of this is important. For a lousy ten thousand dollars we wear out our shoes and break our backs."

"You've got a point. And I'll bet Fitzgerald won't even give us a tip."

They found a cab and packed Amy off toward Manhattan. Then they went back and found that Bridget and Bernie hadn't moved.

"You don't have to watch anymore," Uncle Moe

said. "The bird flew by—to somewhere."

"You must have missed him," Bridget said. "I'm sorry. We have to go, now."

But at that very moment, the announcer announced. "Flight six-five-two bound for stops in the Caribbean is now scheduled to take off at four-twenty-five."

"That's us," Bernie said. "Half an hour late."

"Benglar—Benglar," Otis murmured. "Where have I seen that name before?"

"I'm not a lush," Uncle Moe explained. "But I need a bracer. Let us repair to the cocktail lounge."

"But you had a drink this morning," Bridget said. "and I've heard alcoholics are made, not born."

"All right. I won't argue. I'll settle for a Coke."

That suited Bridget better and they repaired instead to a snack lounge where Cokes, Pepsis, and a Seven-Up were served. They found a table and were halfway through their drinks when a man with a cane and dark glasses looked in.

Bridget caught sight of him and waved. "Hello, Ali. Are you going on a trip?"

Uncle Moe sputtered Coke back into his glass.

Otis hit his forehead again and said, "Now I remember! Benglar! It was on those protest signs."

"That guy is Ali?" Uncle Moe demanded.

Bridget nodded.

"But when I saw him he was wearing a wild get-up," Otis said. "How can you be sure?"

"His ears. They're kind of like Mr. Spock's on that TV show about space. You can't mistake ears like Mr. Spock's."

"What are we sitting here for?" Uncle Moe interrupted. "He's getting away."

And indeed he was. Ali was already out of sight when Otis and Uncle Moe skidded out of the snack lounge.

"He went that way," Uncle Moe said. "Toward those stairs."

The two amateur detectives had more luck this time. They caught up with Ali at the bottom of the stairs and the joust began. It was violent for a few moments because Ali did not want to give up his package with the plain brown wrapper.

But it was two against one and the greater number prevailed. However, Ali, having lost, decided not to stay around. He fled as though he'd suddenly seen some ghosts . . .

TWELVE

There were two of them and they were not ghosts. They were young men in blue suits. They had polite but resolute manners as they laid hands on Uncle Moe and Otis.

"FBI," one of them said.

"You're under arrest," the other one added.

"Now wait a minute!" Uncle Moe howled. "You've got it all wrong. He's the one you're after."

Uncle Moe pointed in the direction Ali had taken. But Ali had faded into nowhere and two black-clad elders with reverse collars were approaching.

"Which one?" the first FBI man asked.

"The one with the cane and the dark glasses."

"Let's not clown around," the second FBI man said after he'd taken the brown package from Otis who happened to be clutching it when they arrived. "This is what we're after. It's in your possession. Therefore, you are under arrest."

"But we've been chasing that money all over town," Uncle Moe pleaded.

"We are not interested in the difficulties in which you became involved while committing your felony," the second FBI man said. "We are interested only in the accomplished fact. Therefore, you are under arrest."

"You keep saying that. And we keep explaining."

"Your explanations are unsatisfactory. Therefore—"

"I know," Uncle Moe said. "At least let us go back and let our friends know what happened. That couple of club-footed morons can't tell criminals from honest citizens."

"You have accomplices?" the first FBI man asked.

"Skip it. They're going on a honeymoon and they don't know anything about this. Take us where we can make our phone call. We're each entitled to a phone call, aren't we?"

"That's the custom."

"I'm black," Otis said. "Being one of an underprivileged minority, I should get two phone calls."

"Well, I'm Jewish," Uncle Moe said, "and we haven't been treated so hot either."

"Your complaints will be given consideration in due course," the first FBI man said politely. "This way, please . . ."

Bridget and Bernie waited. They finished their drinks and waited a while longer. Then Bernie got up and said, "I guess Uncle Moe and Otis took off. We'd better get to our flight."

"Hadn't we better wait a while longer? Or at least

make some inquiries? They might be in trouble."

"I'm sure it's nothing Uncle Moe can't get out of. And nothing's going to spoil our honeymoon, precious. We'll find out all about it when we get back."

"All right, darling. Whatever you say."

"I'll go check the time. Maybe there's been another delay."

"While you're doing that, I'll phone the deli. Just to make sure everything is all right there."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I'm sure it is, but—"

"Okay. There are some phones over there. Make your call and wait for me when you're through . . ."

Bridget went into one of the booths and dialed the deli. Sophie answered.

"Sophie, darling," Bridget said. "We're at the airport. We're about ready to board. Is everything all right?"

"Why shouldn't it be, dear?"

"I was sure it was, but—"

"Oh, I almost forgot. After you left, Oliver called. He seemed to want to get in touch with you real bad."

"Oliver? Again? Sophie, I don't know any—"

Bridget stopped. Her eyes widened. She stared out across the waiting room as though she'd either seen specters or felt a great truth dawn.

Sophie said, "Bridget, are you still there?"

"Oh, good heavens! I remember now. What day is it, Sophie?"

Sophie told her but got no answer. Only a faint, "Oh, good heavens!" in a receding cry. Then there was

silence. Sophie waited a while and then went back to her sandwich board. She was intrigued by what had happened, but she'd seen too much of life as it was lived on Lexington Avenue to be greatly alarmed. All would be learned in due course . . .

After a reasonable time of search, Bernie went to the information counter and spoke to the girl who was on duty.

"I'm looking for my wife."

The girl was a pretty little brunette with a nice smile and an alert manner. She brightened when she saw Bernie. And she brightened even more after he spoke.

"Will I do?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

"You said you were looking for a wife."

"No. I said I was looking for *my* wife. I already have one."

"So many of you do," the information girl replied, her smile becoming less personal. "Shall I have her paged?"

"I'm not sure that would do any good. I've looked everywhere."

"In the lady's room?"

"Well, no—not there."

"You'd be surprised how many girls go there during the course of a day. I'll have her paged."

Bernie stood back and waited. The call went out three times but Bridget did not come running to the information counter to be reunited with her spouse.

"I'm afraid it didn't do any good," Bernie said finally to the little brunette.

"I'm sorry. What do you suppose happened to her?"

"Well, I don't think she was kidnapped again. That would be—"

"Your wife was kidnapped?"

"Yes, but we got her back. So the percentages against it happening again so quickly are pretty long—don't you think?"

The girl wanted to comfort Bernie. He was the kind of boy a girl instinctively wanted to comfort. But there was the practical side to think of.

"You're probably right, but lightning can strike twice, they say."

"But in a place like this. With hundreds of people around."

"That doesn't mean too much. People are strange. They don't want to get involved. Besides, they're all hurrying to catch planes."

"From what I've seen, they needn't bother. Planes don't seem to go out very often. The take-offs keep getting delayed."

"Nevertheless, I'll bet a kidnapper could drag your wife out by the heels screaming and nobody would think it unusual."

"Then what do you think I ought to do?"

"If I were you, I'd talk to the police. They might know something. Or maybe the FBI. I think they're the ones who see to the kidnappings. It's a Federal offense, you know."

"I don't think so. Unless the kidnappers cross state lines with the victim."

"Well, they would hardly have had time to do that with your wife. Still, Connecticut isn't very far away—or New Jersey."

Quite disturbed, now, Bernie followed the girl's directions and knocked on an unmarked door behind the moving stairway and some distance from the cocktail lounge. A man in a blue suit opened the door and said, "Come in. What can we do for you?" Bernie started to answer and then stopped when he saw Otis and Uncle Moe seated dolefully in a far corner of the room. He switched directions and pointed his reply at them.

"What are you two doing here?"

"They're being held," the man said. "You are acquainted with them?"

"Oh, sure. One's my uncle. The other's my partner."

"They may have been involved in a kidnapping."

"That's what I came to talk to you about. I don't really think my wife's been kidnapped, but she's missing, and—"

"Not again!" Uncle Moe howled. "This thing is getting too crazy!"

"Officer," Bernie said. "You *are* an officer, aren't you?"

"FBI."

"Well, I don't think these two had anything to do with the kidnapping—I mean the first one."

"Would you take an oath on that?"

"Well—no."

"What do you mean, no?" Otis demanded. "You trying to railroad us?"

"I mean they were involved, but on the side of the good guys—you know what I mean. They were trying to trap the real kidnapper."

"That isn't a job for amateurs."

"If some of the pros I've seen are any example," Uncle Moe said, "the whole operation had better be turned over to amateurs."

"That's not a very nice thing to say," the FBI man complained. "We found these two with the ransom money in their hands."

"Then they must have just gotten it back from the real kidnapper," Bernie said.

"Sure," Uncle Moe went on, "and these club-footed shoemakers let him get away. He's probably in Benglar now—if that plane ever got off the ground."

"If he is," the FBI man stated, "we'll have him extradited. The FBI takes a serious view of kidnapping. We follow through on such things."

"Wait a minute," Uncle Moe said. "Isn't Benglar the place all the highjacked planes go because we haven't got an extradition treaty with that outfit?"

"In that case, it will be a matter for the State Department. But in the meantime, we're checking out your stories. A decision will be made shortly."

"All this chatter," Bernie complained, "and nobody tells me where I can find my wife."

"How come you're so worried now?" Otis said. "She was gone five days the first time and it didn't bother you."

"I didn't know it."

During the discussion, a second FBI man had been busy on the phone at a desk in the far corner of the room. He now came forward.

"It's all right. You two can go. But you deserve a reprimand for what you did. You should have contacted us instead of waiting for Mr. Fitzgerald to do it."

"So Walt Fitzgerald was the stool pigeon? I'll have a talk with him," Uncle Moe grumbled.

"And I suggest that in the future you let the FBI handle any felonies you chance to stumble on."

"Let's get out of here," Otis advised. "We've still got to go to the car pound for our cab."

"And I've got to break the news at home about Bridget being gone again," Bernie said. "I'm afraid Mom will take it hard . . ."

Sophie Steinberg didn't take it hard exactly. In fact, Bernie couldn't figure out quite how she did take it. She seemed either resigned or dazed. Or perhaps she was just tired from making too many specials over the years.

Anyhow, all she said, was, "You'd better come home, Bernie."

"But Mom, didn't it penetrate? Bridget has vanished again!"

"You'd better come home, son."

"I just talked to the FBI and they're on the case. But Uncle Moe says they didn't do very well with the last one so I'm not sure whether we ought to trust them or not."

"Come on home, Bernie."

Unable to pierce his mother's stoical armor, Bernie hung up and followed Otis and Uncle Moe out to a cab. It hadn't been a very successful day, generally speaking, so spirits were low and little was said.

Only Uncle Moe had a parting gripe. "If I ever need a plane," he growled, "I'll go out of Newark or LaGuardia. I'll sure steer clear of this place."

"I understand it's just as bad everywhere else. You'll always find a rock-head in charge."

After that, they brooded individually . . .

When the cab dropped them in front of the deli, Otis and Uncle Moe went on inside. Bernie was about to follow them when he heard—or thought he heard—a gosh-awful racket upstairs.

So he used the front entrance and when he got to the top and looked into the living room he stood frozen.

The place was alive with children—small children. They were all over the place, and each of them was carrying a special almost as big as they were.

Bridget was presiding. She saw Bernie and rushed to his side. Apology fairly oozed out her pores as she said, "Oh, darling. I'm so sorry! But there was nothing I could do. I just *couldn't* go back on my word. You see, when I called Sophie from the airport, she told me that Oliver had called again."

"Suppose you start at the beginning and speak slowly and distinctly."

"That *is* the beginning, sweetheart. You see, I remembered who Oliver is."

"And who is Oliver?"

Bridget pointed. "That's Oliver—right there. Isn't he cute?"

"You mean the one standing on the needlepoint hitting the other kid with a dill pickle?"

"No, the kid who's getting hit. He's such a wonderful little boy. You see, before school let out, I promised him that I'd give him a party on his birthday. That's what he wanted to remind me about when he kept calling. And I was always out. So today, when Sophie told me, I remembered. And just in time. This is his birthday, so I had to keep my word and give him this party."

"How did you get them all together so quick?"

"That was easy. I called him and told him where to come and he and all his little friends were waiting outside when I got home."

"I thought maybe you'd been kidnapped again."

"Of course not. You do understand, don't you? I didn't even wait to tell you because I knew you *would* understand. You can't let innocent little children stand around on Lexington Avenue, now can you?"

"I guess not. But you'd better stop that little muscleman from trying to throw the puny kid out the window or the cops will show up to join in all this innocent fun."

Bridget went back to her job of promoting joy and

preventing mayhem. Bernie watched her. His heart swelled with love, even as his disappointment at being shunted off his honeymoon remained strong. Would there ever be a honeymoon? Perhaps, perhaps not. Could a man ever know *what* would happen from day to day with a wife like Bridget?

It really didn't matter though. Wherever they happened to be at any given moment—the Caribbean, the North Pole, or over a delicatessen on Lexington Ave.—life with Bridget would always be exciting.

And what man could ask for more?

THE END

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